FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THOUSAND AUTUMNS*

MENG XI SHI

3

# Peerless

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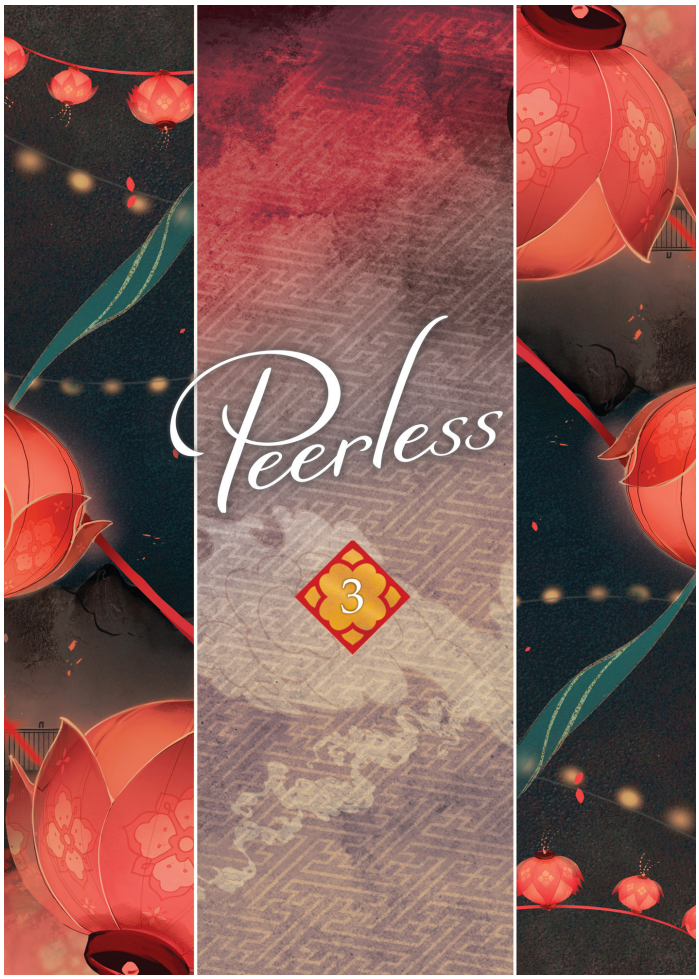
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# Chapter 78

WHO STOOD to benefit from the death of the Western Khaganate's second prince?

Obviously, the first prince. He was now Apa Khagan's only living son. Yet his subordinates couldn't have killed the second prince without alerting anyone—unless, of course, the first prince had colluded with the Sui envoys and asked Feng Xiao to do it for him. Either way, the envoys from Sui were the obvious suspects. Everyone had seen the second prince provoke them and promise they'd die here in the Western Khaganate.

Jinlian felt like her heart was being squeezed by a fist. She'd seen Cui Buqu's silver tongue at work and knew how capable he was. She could only hope he'd find a way out of this predicament. Perhaps he'd even anticipated this twist, and the moment he opened his mouth, all would become clear.

As Jinlian stared at him hopefully, Cui Buqu finally spoke. "If the khagan insists we did it, there isn't much I can say."

*What?* Jinlian suspected her ears had stopped working. She stared at Cui Buqu in disbelief, wishing desperately to rush over and clap her hand over his mouth.

Apa Khagan sneered. "Very well. Since you yourself admit it—"

Cui Buqu held up a hand. "What I said was, if the khagan wishes to pin this crime on us, there's not much I can say. However, accusations must be based on evidence. Are there any witnesses who saw us commit this murder? Did anyone see us leave the second prince's tent? The second prince had many guards around him. Maybe none could defeat Feng Xiao, but could none even notice him?"

"Your deputy envoy was absent from the banquet while Ade was killed." Apa Khagan's tone was cold. "He was also seen entering the hut of the Black Moon Shaman just before his death. One coincidence can be ignored, but two? How long will you refuse to admit your crimes? Guards! Seize them!"

"Give me one day," said Cui Buqu. "I will find the true killer."

Apa Khagan's eyes narrowed. "One day?"

"That's right," said Cui Buqu coolly. "One day. If we can't find the murderer in a day, the khagan can kill us or mince us up, whatever you please."

"No!" The khagan instantly refused. "Who's to say you won't just run off?"

"We came here on orders from our emperor. If we don't complete our mission, we won't be able to face him—there's no point in saving our hides here only to be castigated before the court. Besides, we're not the ones who need to worry. The Black Moon Shaman's killer is still hiding in your midst, ready to strike again at any moment. And it's likely their next target is you, Khagan."

One Göktürk noble, a close associate of the second prince, shouted, "You can't fool us with your lies! Who would believe you?!"

Cui Buqu paid him no mind. "Khagan, let's say you execute us now. The real murderer may still be lurking in the shadows, watching you. You don't have to let us go. I need but one day."

Jinlian seized her chance. "Khagan, Prince Ade was murdered right here in the open. These Sui envoys aren't so foolish; how could they be the murderers?"

The greater khatun spoke up as well. "I ask the khagan: please accommodate the envoy's request. Give them one day."

The khatun was unassuming, but Cui Buqu had seen that she was no fool. She, too, must have realized that a great many people would believe she and her son, the first prince, were colluding with the Sui envoys. They'd already killed the second prince; only the death of the khagan stood between them and the throne of the Western Khaganate. She had to speak frankly and demonstrate her innocence. Regardless of how many allies the second prince had, he was gone. Whatever the truth of his death, the khatun and her son were in a strong position that would only grow stronger. Many were unwilling to offend them and chimed in with agreement.

Apa Khagan was still suspicious, but he couldn't ignore the tide of opinion. After a moment's consideration, he turned back to Cui Buqu. "Only one day?"

“That’s right,” said Cui Buqu.

Apa Khagan pointed at Feng Xiao. “He’s too powerful. If I give you a day, you’ll run.”

“We must investigate and look for evidence,” Cui Buqu replied coolly. “How else can we track down the murderer and prove our innocence? If the khagan is worried, we’ll leave someone here as a hostage.”

From the moment Cui Buqu had asked for a day, Feng Xiao had caught a whiff of a familiar scent—one no one else could detect.

It was the smell of being thrown to the wolves.

Cui Buqu had asked for a single day to investigate. He had known the khagan would never allow them all to run freely about; he would demand one of their number as a hostage. Who else could Cui Buqu offer up but Feng Xiao?

Feng Xiao rubbed at his nose. The wound on his shoulder seemed to throb dully once more. He’d sensed it coming, but no one enjoyed being someone else’s pawn.

“I’ll stay,” Cui Buqu said.

The hand on Feng Xiao’s nose froze.

“Feng Xiao will look for the killer.”

Feng Xiao gave Cui Buqu a startled look.

Apa Khagan frowned. “No. He’s a skilled martial artist; he’ll escape!”

“He’s only the deputy envoy,” said Cui Buqu. “I’m the head of this expedition. I may not know martial arts, but my life is worth far more than his. I’m willing to remain as hostage to put the khagan’s worries to rest. If you refuse, we can carve a bloody path out of here. We’re capable of that, are we not?”

Terrified, the khagan stepped quickly behind his guards, wariness written all over his face.

Feng Xiao had killed Fo’er with ease. He was obviously capable of demolishing everyone present. Even if the Göktürks managed to overwhelm

him with numbers, there was no telling how heavy their losses would be. Apa Khagan was a man who greatly valued his own life. However profound his grief for the second prince, he wasn't willing to join him in the underworld.

Jinlian spoke quietly. "Khagan, our relationship with Ishbara died with Fo'er. We mustn't offend Sui too."

Apa Khagan looked at Cui Buqu doubtfully. "Can you really find the killer in a single day?"

Cui Buqu swore no heartfelt oaths. "I will do my best," he said simply.

"Your deputy envoy must return within the day, whether he finds the killer or not. If he's late, I won't hesitate to kill you."

Feng Xiao chuckled.

The khagan turned furiously. "Why are you laughing?!"

Feng Xiao stepped forward. Though he approached the khagan at a leisurely pace, no one dared stop him. The crowd instinctively parted for him as he sauntered up to stand before Cui Buqu.

"Be at ease, Khagan," he said. "He promised a day, so I will do everything in my power to investigate within that time. After all, what would I do if you killed my lover?"

Jinlian had been acting as interpreter, but at that final word, she froze mid-translation. She considered herself someone who'd seen all sorts, who'd weathered the waves and braved many storms, but this, it seemed, was too much even for her.

Cui Buqu knew Feng Xiao was merely putting on a show for Apa Khagan's benefit. If Apa Khagan thought they were lovers, he wouldn't worry Feng Xiao might drop everything and dash off. And he'd think twice about eliminating Cui Buqu before the deadline.

Thus Cui Buqu remained still, allowing Feng Xiao to embrace him and deliver a melodramatic proclamation of love: "Oh Ququ, you must wait for me. I swear, I will find the murderer and prove your innocence!"

Cui Buqu forced himself to reach out and return Feng Xiao's embrace, playing along.

Jinlian was dumbfounded, and the khagan looked only half-convinced. As for the first prince, he looked rather envious.

“Are you sure about this?” Feng Xiao murmured, his voice low in Cui Buqu’s ear. “If we leave now, they won’t be able to stop us.”

Cui Buqu knew no voice transmission techniques, so he merely hummed his affirmation. Feng Xiao released him, then turned and walked away without looking back. Compared to his ardent show of adoration a moment ago, he was like a different person, unflinching and resolute.

The corner of Cui Buqu’s mouth twitched as he shoved the small vial Feng Xiao had slipped him further into his sleeve.

# Chapter 79

CUI BUQU WAS DETAINED in the second prince's yurt. Over a hundred guards kept watch outside. They'd notice even a fly slipping inside, let alone a person. No matter how formidable Feng Xiao was, he would find it difficult to rescue Cui Buqu and come out unscathed.

They'd sworn they needed only a day, from dawn to dusk. This time would pass in the blink of an eye; even Apa Khagan was willing to wait.

Feng Xiao first returned to their yurt, where Qiao Xian was waiting. She'd already caught wind of what had transpired and scrambled out of bed in a fury. "How could you leave the lord chief there by himself?!"

Feng Xiao shrugged, the picture of helplessness. "Your lord chief asked to stay behind. What was I to do?"

Qiao Xian was so furious she could no longer even pretend to be friendly. "That's impossible. I don't believe you!"

"Then go ask him yourself."

"Of course I'm going!" she yelled before storming out in a towering rage.

Yet there was still no peace for Feng Xiao. Moments later, Jinlian arrived, looking as anxious as Qiao Xian.

She'd thrown in her lot with these Sui envoys. They were all in the same leaky boat, and it was far too late to get off. All she could do was grit her teeth and sit tight. "Feng-langjun. How do you intend to find the murderer? If I can help, please tell me how."

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"It's nearly dawn, and we only have a single day." Jinlian wrung her hands. "The khagan was ready to kill Cui-xiansheng out there—even if you can stall, it won't be for long. If you can't find the real murderer, his life is in danger!"

"Ah, I do have one idea," said Feng Xiao. "Maybe you've already guessed it."

Jinlian was struck by a deep sense of foreboding. “Please speak.”

“Cui Buqu and I oversee the Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus respectively,” said Feng Xiao. “Under normal circumstances, we keep to our own domains. Allow me to draw an analogy—we’re rather like your first and second princes. We share no warm feelings and delight in each other’s misfortune. Perhaps you understand now?”

“…I don’t.”

Feng Xiao put his hands together. “Let me be plain. Cui Buqu has been captured. If I do nothing, the Zuoyue Bureau loses its chief and I have one less rival. To me, this is a good thing. Why should I come up with ways to help him escape?”

Jinlian was flabbergasted. “But…but didn’t you come here to form an alliance with us on behalf of the Sui dynasty?”

“That was Cui Buqu’s errand, not mine,” said Feng Xiao. “I merely came along to take a piece of the credit.” He spoke matter-of-factly. “Should we succeed, it’s a feather in my cap. Should we fail, I can simply go back and blame it all on Cui Buqu. It’s hardly something I need to concern myself with. Don’t you agree?”

Jinlian was speechless.

Feng Xiao was all smiles. “He loves plotting against others, but this time he’s fallen into the pit he dug himself. Isn’t it enough that I’m not clapping and cheering? Why should I reach down and pull him out?”

With this, he rose and stepped out of the yurt, leaving Jinlian staring after him.

“He must be wallowing in misery right now,” Feng Xiao muttered to himself. “It’s too bad I’m deprived of the sight of Daoist Master Cui scratching his head in frustration. He must be entirely at a loss for what to do. But we’re colleagues, after all. This time tomorrow, I’ll at least see to his funeral.”

Jinlian watched him saunter off, her head spinning. She felt the urge to rush to Cui Buqu and tell him he’d judged wrongly, that Feng Xiao wouldn’t try to rescue him. That in fact, he was prepared to stand back and watch him die as he clapped his hands with glee.

But perhaps Cui Buqu already had his own strategy for keeping this boat afloat. If so, running to him now might ruin Cui Buqu's plans. Jinlian stood rooted to the spot, tormented by indecision.

Apa Khagan knew he had no one under his command capable of restricting Feng Xiao's movements, so he hadn't tried. Instead, he simply dispatched someone to follow him and report on his whereabouts.

But Feng Xiao didn't take the chance to run, nor did he rush out to look for traces of the murderer. After he left the yurt, he took a stroll through the luxuriant grasslands. A group of merchants had recently arrived, bringing with them the most popular silks and ceramics from the Central Plains. Feng Xiao drifted over to join the excitement and stayed chatting with them for several hours.

There was no official trade agreement between the Khaganate and the Central Plains, but the Göktürks rarely turned away merchants. Once the Göktürk nobles had begun using silks and ceramics from the Central Plains, it had become impossible for them to give these luxuries up.

The merchants here now had come from all over. Some were Han, but others had the strong brows and noses of the Western Regions and beyond. It was rare for a Han to meet a familiar face out in these foreign lands, and they treated Feng Xiao with great hospitality, even inviting him to share a meal of roast lamb. Feng Xiao accepted without hesitation.

The roast lamb was seasoned with cumin, so tender it melted in Feng Xiao's mouth. Next came a bunch of grapes, bursting with sweetness. Though the food here couldn't compare to the variety available in the Central Plains, the quality of what they had was unmatched. Feng Xiao slowly made his way through the ribs, savoring them as if they were the world's most wonderful delicacies.

But after a few moments, he put them back down. Believing they weren't to his taste, the host ordered some beef brought over instead.

"It's not the meat," said Feng Xiao. "It's only that I can't help but feel it's lacking in flavor."

The cook was perplexed. "I used plenty of salt," he said. "If the gentleman prefers stronger flavors, why not sprinkle on a little more?"

Feng Xiao shook his head. Something was off.

By all rights, he should be completely free of worries. He could simply straighten his clothes and return to the Central Plains to laugh at the Zuoyue Bureau, leaderless and in chaos. The Jiejian Bureau would be without equal, and Feng Xiao would have one less clever person to contend with.

What was there to be dissatisfied about?

Feng Xiao looked down at the tasteless roast lamb. He sighed. “I’ve gotten used to having someone to bicker with.”

He left the banquet and strolled along the grassy shores of the lake. A white egret alighted nearby. It was covered in luxurious, snow-white feathers, its neck a graceful curve—not unlike the curve of Cui Buqu’s back when he was lying in bed, unwilling to get up. But of course, the part that resembled Cui Buqu most was its sharp beak, always ready to start pecking.

Feng Xiao imagined Cui Buqu with a beak and burst out laughing.

Jinlian had been looking for Feng Xiao all this time. Finally spotting him, she rushed over to try again to persuade him, only to be caught off-guard by his carefree laugh.

*It’s over*, she thought. *Cui Buqu is doomed.* Feng Xiao was positively joyful; there was no chance he’d be willing to help. Jinlian sighed. All she could do at this point was find a way to see Cui Buqu and hope he had a plan to turn things around.

Feng Xiao turned to look at her curiously. “What are you doing here?”

Jinlian was in no mood to speak to him. “Nothing,” she said coolly. “I’m leaving. Feng-langjun, don’t let me interrupt you.”

“Wait.” Feng Xiao stopped her. “Is the Black Moon Shaman’s corpse still being kept somewhere?”

Jinlian shook her head. “It was charred beyond recognition. They cremated him immediately. Shamans are usually cremated after their death anyway.”

“But the stone hut is still there, no? He had two disciples. Fetch them here; I have something to ask them.”

“I thought you had no desire to save Cui-xiansheng.” Jinlian regarded him suspiciously.

Feng Xiao smiled. “There’s only one Cui Buqu. If he dies, where would I find anyone half as interesting?”

***

Qiao Xian hadn’t been idle. Her wounds were serious, so rescuing Cui Buqu on her own was out of the question. Barging in to see him was similarly impossible. It was only when the first prince passed by and saw her pacing outside the tent that he spoke to the guards and convinced them to admit her.

Cui Buqu didn’t appear to have suffered any mistreatment. He sat cross-legged on the ground with his eyes closed, as if unaware of his own imminent death.

“Lord Chief!” Qiao Xian rushed over and dropped to one knee. “This subordinate has been too useless. I’ll find some way to rescue you; I won’t let you be humiliated!”

“Where is Feng Xiao?” asked Cui Buqu.

Qiao Xian was furious. “Don’t pin your hopes on him! He never had any intention of rescuing you.”

“Bring him a message from me,” said Cui Buqu, voice hushed. “Tell him to run as far away as possible. Tell him he isn’t to come back for me—no matter what. He mustn’t take revenge on Apa Khagan either. The khagan has countless capable men. Even together, the two of you are no match for him.”

Qiao Xian froze.

If not for Cui Buqu’s calm and collected expression, she would have suspected he’d gone mad. If he wasn’t mad, there had to be something wrong with her ears.

“What time is it?” asked Cui Buqu.

“A quarter to six,” she replied. “The sun rose some time ago.”

Cui Buqu nodded. “Then there’s no time to waste. If you wish to rescue me, give him this message.”

Think as she might, Qiao Xian couldn’t puzzle out what significance lay in those words. She feared that if Feng Xiao heard them, he might be all the happier to turn on his heel and leave without a second thought. But in the end, this was an order from Cui Buqu. What could she do but obey? Qiao Xian rose to her feet and departed.

Cui Buqu watched her vanish through the curtains. When he was certain she was gone, he pulled the vial from his sleeve, picked up a nearby incense burner, and poured in the contents.

Göktürk aristocrats loved Han products and copied them aggressively. These incense burners, originally designed for wealthy households in the Central Plains, were everywhere throughout the camp. He watched faint wisps of smoke ribbon upward from the burner and dissipate without a trace, leaving only a clean, sweet scent. Cui Buqu stared for a long time, then suddenly shouted in Turkic: “I need to see Apa Khagan at once! Tell him that if he doesn’t come, the consequences will be dire!”

Had he been any normal prisoner, the guard would have ignored him. But Cui Buqu was far from normal. The guard went immediately to report to Apa Khagan.

In a rare piece of luck, the khagan was neither meeting with his own people nor submerged in the throes of lust with his Kuchean beauty. When the guard entered the khagan’s yurt, he found the khagan sitting cross-legged at its center, his palms upturned and fingers pinched in a mudra. No matter how the guard looked at it, it was unusual behavior.

But he didn’t dare gawk or comment. He quickly relayed Cui Buqu’s message.

Apa Khagan didn’t fly into a rage. He listened calmly throughout the guard’s speech, and a strange smile spread across that face weathered by lust and time. “Cui Buqu.” He said the name for the first time. Each syllable was uttered with precision, soft and languid, as if the khagan were savoring its flavor on his tongue. He rose and walked toward Cui Buqu’s tent.

Only then did the guard realize: Apa Khagan had been speaking in Chinese.

# Chapter 80

"YOU WISHED to see me?"

Apa Khagan had brought a number of guards with him. This was his territory: He could bring whomever he wanted wherever he wanted, without permission from anyone else. The new crowd of people brought a wave of heat into the yurt. That already-faint scent was quickly overpowered, almost entirely undetectable.

Cui Buqu nodded. "I wished to see you."

"Speak." Apa Khagan looked down at Cui Buqu with the air of a man who had victory in his grasp. His weathered face bore witness to the difficult lives of the nomadic tribes, creased with hardships unknown to the nobles of the Central Plains. As he looked at Cui Buqu, his expression held indifference and mockery, with none of his previous hospitality and desire to please. He regarded Cui Buqu as if killing him would be like crushing an ant.

"The second prince only just passed away," Cui Buqu said without preamble. "So why is it, Khagan, that you don't seem sad at all?"

"As a Göktürk khagan, all the Göktürk people occupy my heart," said Apa Khagan coolly. "I can't forget my duties as khagan simply because my son died."

Any Göktürk would be awed by such principled and upstanding words. Even the guards at Apa Khagan's side looked moved. Apa Khagan's previous buffoonery seemed to have been completely forgotten—had this been the Central Plains, they'd probably have fallen to their knees on the spot and cried, *Long live the khagan!*

But Cui Buqu simply laughed, as though what Apa Khagan had said was a joke. His laughter drew furious glares from the guards, who looked as though they might rush over and strike him.

"I wish to speak to the khagan *alone*," Cui Buqu said. "If not, Khagan, I fear I may say something you'll regret."

The two of them stared each other down. Apa Khagan showed not a ripple of emotion. He signaled the guards to leave and ordered a heavy curtain hung over the entrance to block any noise and prevent prying eyes.

“What did you wish to say?” asked Apa Khagan.

Cui Buqu remained silent.

Apa Khagan laughed breezily. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing you say now can avert your death.”

Cui Buqu coughed twice. His complexion was paler now than when he’d arrived from the Central Plains, but the change was merely that of white to whiter. Few people would observe him closely enough to notice the difference.

He raised a sleeve with slender fingers, his bony knuckles straining beneath delicate skin as he covered his mouth. Yet he looked anything but frail or helpless. Instead, his fingers resembled bamboo, straight and unbending under that wide sleeve. “But you still came,” he said. “You’re curious about what I have to say. Or maybe you’re curious how much I know.”

Apa Khagan didn’t speak. He was waiting for Cui Buqu to continue, as he knew Cui Buqu would. He’d stall for time by flaunting his intelligence and interrogating Apa Khagan as long as he could. It didn’t matter; Apa Khagan had come prepared. No matter what Cui Buqu said or how much he knew, it would make no difference to the outcome.

Sure enough, Cui Buqu’s next words were shocking: “At first, I thought the Black Moon Shaman was impersonating you.”

Apa Khagan arched a brow in interest. “And what changed your mind?”

“The stone hut.”

“Oh?”

“Feng Xiao went to the stone hut that night,” said Cui Buqu. “His nose is keener than a dog’s. He picked up the scent of medicinal ingredients—in particular, lovage, musk, and ginger.”

Feng Xiao wasn’t there to make a retort on Cui Buqu’s comment about his nose, nor protest that Cui Buqu had compared him to a dog. Cui

Buqu was free to say whatever he wished.

“A pinch of musk, half a tael of ginger, a tael of ganquan, and a tael of lovage. Do you know what the resulting drug is?” Cui Buqu didn’t wait for a reply. He didn’t need one. “Purification pills. Burning them neutralizes the stench of corpses.

“Jinlian mentioned that it was the Black Moon Shaman who cured the khagan when he fell ill shortly before our arrival. Upon Jinlian’s return from the Central Plains, she found Apa Khagan’s attitude had undergone a complete reversal. He was no longer willing to support her in seeking an alliance with the Central Plains and refused to see the Sui envoys. He even treated Jinlian herself with a cold distance that was completely unprecedented.

“The recipe for these pills calls for ginger and musk, which can’t be found here in the Western Khaganate; you must purchase them from the merchants of the Central Plains. I therefore sent Jinlian to discover who had gone to the merchants for these items. It was you, Khagan.

“At first, I thought the Black Moon Shaman had killed the khagan and assumed his identity. But the purification pills changed my mind. A Göktürk, even a great shaman, couldn’t possibly be familiar with such a recipe—let alone know that it can be used to disguise a corpse’s stench. This wasn’t something a Göktürk would do. And as for you? Since disguising yourself as the khagan, your actions have never seemed to benefit the Western Khaganate.”

Apa Khagan raised his hands and began clapping slowly.

He showed no sign of panic. He’d patiently waited for Cui Buqu to finish his entire speech, exhibiting neither alarmed confusion nor rage born of humiliation. If anything, his expression might have been described as appreciative. “I expect nothing less from the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau. How much you can deduce merely from the scent of some herbs. Someone once told me Great Sui is served by several people I couldn’t afford to offend. One was Feng Xiao with his martial arts. Another was Cui Buqu with his scheming. I personally witnessed Feng Xiao’s martial prowess; even the Khaganate’s foremost expert fell at his hands. Now that I’ve heard your wise words, I’ve gained yet more understanding.”

Every word was in flawless Chinese of the northern Central Plains.

But Cui Buqu had long anticipated this. His face remained blank, showing no surprise. “Should I thank the khagan—no, should I rather thank this good brother who’s impersonating the khagan—for his praise?”

The fake khagan laughed. “When did you realize?”

“From the beginning,” said Cui Buqu.

“Impossible!”

Cui Buqu regarded him coldly. “You slipped up within our first moments in your presence. Apa Khagan is a lustful man, and Qiao Xian is beautiful. But when I brought Qiao Xian into the royal yurt on the first day, you didn’t once glance at her, let alone express amazement or make a lecherous remark. Do you think that’s typical of the khagan?”

The man looked thoughtful and gave a slight nod of agreement.

“What’s more, on the night the Black Moon Shaman died, all the envoys were present at the start of the banquet. You, the ruling khagan, should properly have been there as well. Yet you did not appear. Everyone said that you’d recently spent all your time in the arms of your new Kuchean beauty at the expense of your duties. They thought you were happy to be late even for such an important occasion. But to me, this proved only one thing: You predicted Feng Xiao would go looking for the Black Moon Shaman and set a trap for him. While everyone was at the banquet, you fought Feng Xiao, making him think you were the shaman. Then you set fire to the stone hut along with the shaman’s corpse and made sure Feng Xiao took the fall.

“There’s more. Feng Xiao was injured during your fight, but you were no better off. Feng Xiao slipped into the second prince’s yurt and managed to mask the smell of blood by pretending Prince Ade had some bizarre proclivities. When you arrived with that Kuchean woman, I could smell that her perfume was stronger than usual. You must have used her to mask the smell of blood.”

Cui Buqu delivered this entire speech in a single breath. His body was at its limit, and as soon as he finished speaking, he bent his head and coughed. But his thoughts were racing. This was a person capable of disguising themselves as a Göktürk khagan as part of an incredibly elaborate scheme. He’d played everyone for a fool, including Fo’er. Even

Cui Buqu hadn’t been confident in his suspicions at first. Anyone could see how frightening this man was.

But he’d also patiently listened to Cui Buqu’s speeches as he stalled for time, and it certainly wasn’t because Cui Buqu’s face was handsome, nor that his voice was especially lovely. It was clear that this man also wanted to buy time for reasons of his own.

Right now, Cui Buqu was a sitting duck. Whatever reason this man had for stalling, it had to have something to do with Feng Xiao. At that thought, Cui Buqu began to cough more violently. All he could do was hope Feng Xiao had understood his intentions, and that he’d cooperate with him from outside. Without this, all his struggles here would be for naught.

The fake Apa Khagan cast him a concerned look, yet the words that emerged from his mouth were quite the opposite. “Are you all right? Does all this coughing mean you’re about to die? From what I’ve seen, you’re frail and sickly. Why don’t you just give up?”

Cui Buqu coughed twice more. “Thank you for your consideration, Yuxiu-chanshi,[1] but I fear I must disappoint you.”

The fake khagan narrowed his eyes, surging with bloodlust.

Cui Buqu seemed not to notice. The coughing had tired him, and he leaned against a pillar for support as he caught his breath. His hand remained pressed to his chest—there was a throbbing pain there, which even breathing aggravated. At times like these, Qiao Xian would normally rush over and grab his hand to channel him some internal energy and alleviate his suffering. But Qiao Xian wasn’t here. All he could do was breathe as shallowly as possible to try to lessen the burden on his body.

The fake khagan’s bloodthirsty stare was like needles pricking his skin. The pain increased, and his back broke out in a cold sweat. At long last, he heard the man say, “How did you know it was me?”

Cui Buqu closed his eyes, waiting out a surge of agony before he answered. “In Qiemo, you ensured we met the monk Yuheng, who greatly resembles you. You meant to mislead us, and at first it worked. We really did think he was you. In hindsight, by then you must have already arrived in the Western Khaganate and set your plans in motion.

“Apa Khagan is a leader of his people. There are countless people around him at all times. Killing him is one thing, but successfully disguising yourself as him and taking his place is quite another. It was no small task. Killing the Black Moon Shaman, however, was much easier. He lived far from the rest of the tribe, with few servants. You killed him first and stole his identity. Then, under the guise of treating the khagan, you murdered him and hid his corpse in the stone hut. The purification pills concealed the stench, and you emerged in your disguise as the khagan, putting out that the shaman was recuperating in seclusion.

“You attached yourself to the Kuchean beauty because she arrived after you took Apa Khagan’s place. On the one hand, she corroborated your reputation as a lecher; on the other, you were able to minimize the time you spent with the khagan’s other women, who knew him better and might expose you. It was a brilliant plan.

“Everything you did after assuming Apa Khagan’s identity was intended to exacerbate the conflict between Ishbara and the Sui dynasty. You wished for the Western Khaganate to fall into chaos, and led them down the path of destruction. When I look at the way you impeded us throughout, everything makes sense. In truth, prior to this I was only speculating. I wasn’t certain until now.” A faint smile spread across Cui Buqu’s face. “When you admitted it yourself.”

The fake khagan—no, the monk Yuxiu—nodded indifferently. He had no further interest in affecting the aged, raspy voice of Apa Khagan and returned to his original voice with its clear and pleasant timbre. He was a youthful and handsome monk, and even the time-creased face he wore couldn’t fully conceal the unconscious elegance beneath.

“I admitted it. So what? Don’t tell me you’re waiting for Feng Xiao to save you? To be blunt, I’d imagine he’s happy to see you die. Even if he does find his conscience, it’s impossible for him to come for you.”

# Chapter 81

EVIDENCE OF the fire was everywhere in the empty stone hut.

The bed and cabinets had been made of wood, and most of the shaman's possessions had been ceramic or cloth. Almost nothing remained of them. Even the shards were blackened, and a charred smell lingered in the air.

The shaman's body had long since been removed. There were no clues to be found here. Jinlian watched Feng Xiao pace around the hut with mounting unease.

"Did you find anything?" she asked, unable to stop herself.

Feng Xiao had been crouched on the floor scrutinizing it for a long while. He rose and dusted off his hands. "Have someone fetch a pail of water."

Jinlian's heart leapt into her throat. "What is it? Have you noticed something?"

"No, I need to wash my hands."

Jinlian was speechless. She had the powerful urge to pick up the ceramic jug and bring it down over Feng Xiao's head—but she didn't dare. She took a deep breath and exhaled, but couldn't expel her anxiety. "Feng-langjun, this is a matter of life or death. The khagan is truly furious. If we don't find the murderer in time, he might really have Cui-xiansheng killed."

Feng Xiao hummed carelessly. "I'm here, aren't I? If things go south, I'll just grab him and leave."

This was the attitude Jinlian feared most: his apparent belief that everyone was beneath his consideration due to his martial arts. Perhaps these Sui envoys could depart without a backward look, but Jinlian could not do the same. After this incident, the chance of forming an alliance was slim to none. Jinlian could only hope the khagan wouldn't take his fury out on her, but it was a slim hope indeed.

She couldn’t force Feng Xiao to take action; her only option was to appeal to him through logic and sentiment. She gave him a strained smile. “Feng-gongzi is a peerless martial artist—a talent that is one in a million. Naturally, you fear nothing. But consider Cui-xiansheng. He came here on the court’s orders. If he fails, what will he do when he returns to your capital? An investigation and dismissal may be the best he can hope for.”

Feng Xiao looked at her strangely. “Why should I consider him? I saved his life once already; I can’t do him any greater favor than that. As for the emperor’s investigation, I can’t wait. The Jiejian Bureau will have one less rival, no?”

Jinlian felt she was losing her mind. She’d never met anyone so difficult. She’d thought Cui Buqu was bad enough, but Feng Xiao was, if anything, more stubborn. At this very moment, Cui Buqu was imprisoned in the second prince’s yurt. Even if he were the wisest man in the land, he’d have a hard time putting that intelligence to use in his current circumstances. Feng Xiao’s role was vital, but he refused to be rational. On top of that, he didn’t seem remotely distressed.

Maybe she should try begging the greater khatun and the first prince for help. The Sui envoys had made a favorable impression on them, and Prince Yixun got along well with Cui Buqu. Perhaps they could be convinced to plead for mercy on his behalf. With this in mind, she turned to leave.

“It’s useless going to the first prince.” Feng Xiao had seen right through her. “He and the greater khatun are well-disposed toward an alliance with Sui, but if the prince speaks up for Cui Buqu now, he’ll be suspected of colluding with our party and murdering Prince Ade himself. The greater khatun will never allow it.”

Jinlian slowed to a stop. Feng Xiao was right. But she was desperate to save Cui Buqu—what other option did she have? “When Cui-xiansheng gave himself up so Feng-gongzi could go free, I’m sure he never thought Feng-gongzi wouldn’t so much as glance back at him.”

Feng Xiao was unruffled. “I’m waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” she asked suspiciously.

“For Cui Buqu. He volunteered to remain behind, yet told me nothing. There must have been something he was still unsure of. The moment he figures it out, he’s certain to send word to us.”

At that moment, they heard the sound of swift footfalls outside.

Jinlian and Feng Xiao stepped out of the stone hut to see Qiao Xian sweeping toward them. With her fluttering white clothes and graceful figure, she truly lived up to the promise of her name—Xian, *celestial*. Her expression, however, was nowhere near as serene as the smooth leaps of her qinggong.

“The lord chief told me to relay a message,” she said the moment she was within earshot of Feng Xiao. “He said you must run as far away as possible. You mustn’t go back for him no matter what, nor take revenge on Apa Khagan. He said the khagan has countless capable men with him, and that you and I aren’t his match.”

“Cui-xiansheng really said that?” Jinlian felt herself begin to panic again at this news. Feng Xiao was already disinclined to save Cui Buqu. This message would only give him more reason to leave.

Qiao Xian sighed. “Yes. The lord chief said I must relay this message to Deputy Chief Feng if I wish to rescue him.”

She’d mulled over his words the whole way here but gleaned nothing. All she could do was place her hopes in Feng Xiao.

“Look at you.” Feng Xiao heaved a sigh. “He told you to relay these words without giving you time to consider them. He knew you’d never understand. In the end, it’s all up to me.”

Qiao Xian suppressed the urge to explode at him. “Tell us then, what does the message mean?”

Feng Xiao laughed contemptuously. “Do you see your lord chief as the type to willingly sacrifice himself for others?”

“You’re not making sense!” snapped Qiao Xian. “Can’t you get to the point?”

“Of course he’s not,” Feng Xiao said solemnly. “He’s a trap-setting fox who digs pitfalls for others to tumble into again and again. Even if he jumps into his own pit, he makes sure to drag someone down with him to

cushion his fall. You've worked under him so long and you don't understand this much?"

A vein throbbed in Qiao Xian's forehead.

"He means the opposite of what he says," Feng Xiao pronounced.

"What do you mean?" Jinlian asked.

"Asking us to run as far away as possible, to never come back for him. He's saying we must go find him. Telling us not to take revenge on Apa Khagan—the khagan himself is the key."

The longer Jinlian listened, the more confused she became. "So he's telling us to plead with the khagan on his behalf?"

"No," said Feng Xiao. "He's probably realized there's something strange about Apa Khagan. I'll look for the khagan; you two look for Cui Buqu. Stay with him no matter what happens."

His expression abruptly turned serious. He bent and picked up a stone, then spun and threw it hard. Under Jinlian and Qiao Xian's astonished eyes, a man leapt out from the forest behind the stone hut and pounced toward Feng Xiao, quick as lightning.

Yet Feng Xiao seemed to have expected this. Without seeming to move, he had already drifted backward several paces to evade the newcomer's thunderous strike. Before the man could react, he struck out with his palm.

Qiao Xian and Jinlian watched the two figures engage in battle, attacks raining down like shooting stars. There was no opportunity for them to intervene, even to support Feng Xiao. They were stunned. Fo'er was dead, yet here was a second martial artist of comparable skill and power. Where had he come from? Not only had this man appeared out of nowhere, his techniques were uncanny. He used neither blade nor spear; rather, an iridescent light flashed from his raised sleeves. Closer inspection revealed a thin metal chain, neither silver nor gold. It evaded Feng Xiao's true qi as if it had a mind of its own, and in a flash had wrapped itself around his wrist.

Feng Xiao sneered and gave his arm a small shake, using his qi to break the chain's hold. But the chain was persistent. At the command of its master, it swept toward Feng Xiao's vital acupoints. Such weapons weren't

rare, but neither were they common. Had Cui Buqu been here, he would surely have pinpointed this opponent's identity. Unfortunately, he was not; Feng Xiao had no one to rely on but himself.

His opponent's attacks were vicious. He gave Feng Xiao no respite but attacked again and again, surprising Feng Xiao with bizarre techniques. He was obviously determined to kill Feng Xiao then and there.

Feng Xiao's martial arts were unparalleled, but he'd fought the mystery person in the stone hut just two days ago and been wounded. He'd then fought and killed Fo'er, which could only have worsened his injuries. After such a string of battles, even the best martial artist in the world would be pushed to the brink.

Though Feng Xiao moved with an assuredness that seemed to indicate he had everything under control, his opponent was certain his strength must be flagging. Feng Xiao would die here today. The unknown man laughed, his heart filling with hatred as his strikes grew increasingly ferocious.

Even Qiao Xian and Jinlian were given no chance to retreat. Several men in black had appeared out of thin air, sweeping toward them and blocking their escape.

Jinlian had never seen them before, but their attacks and movements were too similar—they were either from the same sect or had trained under the same master. Why would such a group suddenly come to the Khaganate?

Could they be behind the murder of the shaman and the second prince?

All these thoughts flashed through Jinlian's mind as a blade bit into her waist. She endured the pain and leapt back.

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"Deputy Chief Feng will never make it in time. I don't recommend pinning your hopes on him." Yuxiu smiled faintly.

He watched as Cui Buqu's coughs became increasingly violent, even reaching out to pat him on the back a couple of times as if he felt a scrap of pity.

Cui Buqu didn't shrink from Yuxiu's hand. He didn't have the strength. His head felt heavy with fatigue, but he forced himself to keep his eyes open. Once his coughing subsided, he again began to speak. "There's something I've always wondered about you. No matter how I thought, I couldn't make sense of it."

Yuxiu smiled faintly again. "Did you wonder why I became the advisor of the Prince of Jin and gained his favor and respect? Though I lack the immense authority of you and Deputy Chief Feng, my future is bright and boundless. I'm from a prestigious sect—even if I left the court tomorrow and chose to roam the jianghu, I could still make a name for myself. Why, then, do I keep choosing to pit myself against the two of you?"

"That's right." Cui Buqu furrowed his brow. "Unless of course you bear a grudge against the Prince of Jin. Perhaps you deliberately remain at his side in the guise of his strategist in order to sabotage the Sui dynasty from within and drag your patron down with you?"

Yuxiu shook his head. "I do not and have never had a grudge against the Prince of Jin."

"Then does the Prince of Jin scheme for his own ambition? Did he secretly create the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai and command you to recruit talent so he might overthrow the crown prince and usurp the throne?"

His questions were dangerously blunt, as if Cui Buqu was completely unafraid of suggesting something so taboo. Yuxiu was momentarily stunned. He burst out laughing. "You're really… I've always been reluctant to kill you. If you hadn't repeatedly gotten in my way, you'd never have ended up in your current predicament."

Cui Buqu merely closed his eyes and continued. "The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai are led by thirteen directors, each operating independently. Feng Xiaolian ranks last at thirteen; Duan Qihu was twelfth; Yuheng was eleventh. Given your abilities, you must be far higher up. Could you be the first director—the Yi-xiansheng they spoke of?"

Yuxiu shook his head. “I’m not.” At Cui Buqu’s doubtful expression, he smiled. “I know you don’t believe me, but it’s the truth.”

He’d remained relaxed and carefree the entire time. As far as Yuxiu was concerned, he had everything within his grasp; any tricks Cui Buqu might try didn’t concern him. As long as Feng Xiao was taken care of, Cui Buqu could be as brilliant as the great strategist Zhuge Liang and there would still be nothing he could do.

Yet in the next moment, his smile froze on his lips. Yuxiu rose to his feet and paced around the room. Finally, in a dark corner behind a cabinet, he found the incense burner.

The moment he sniffed it, the color drained from his face. He flung the burner to the ground and grabbed some bedding to throw over it. Striding forward, he grabbed Cui Buqu by the throat and slammed him to the floor, snarling into Cui Buqu’s graying face. “What did you put in the incense?!”

Cui Buqu strained to move his lips. Slowly, he mouthed the words: *Incense…of…helplessness.*

Yuxiu’s bloodlust surged, a force almost as physical as the hand around Cui Buqu’s throat, ready to ferry him straight to the underworld. Blood trickled slowly from the corner of Cui Buqu’s mouth.

# Chapter 82

YUXIU HAD HEARD of the terrors of incense of helplessness. It was a one-of-a-kind poison used by the Jiejian Bureau on uncooperative or tight-lipped suspects. The Divine Farmer Shennong had consumed hundreds of plants, poisoning himself to learn their effects so the ailing masses might put them to use in agriculture and medicine. But Yuxiu had no ambitions of becoming another Shennong, and no desire to experience the potency of incense of helplessness.

His fury appeared even more savage on Apa Khagan's borrowed features. Yuxiu ground his teeth. He was ready to strangle Cui Buqu to death on the spot, but one final sliver of reason stopped him.

"Where's the antidote?!"

There was no antidote for the incense of helplessness, but Cui Buqu wasn't about to tell Yuxiu that. Blood foamed at the corner of his mouth as he coughed, and his answer came out as a mumble. "It's pointless even if you hold your breath… The moment you entered, it seeped through your skin… Now it's circulating to your entire body through your meridians. The more you try to suppress it with your internal energy, the worse it will get…" He coughed harder.

Yuxiu pressed Cui Buqu to the ground and leaned in so they were nose to nose. The lower his voice dropped, the stronger his bloodlust blazed in his eyes. "What about you? You've been poisoned by the incense too. Do you plan to die with me?"

Cui Buqu smiled. "Your life is a valuable one. Dying alongside you is worth the price."

Unable to breathe with Yuxiu's hand around his throat, Cui Buqu raised his head to gasp for air. The faint light trickling through the thin material of the yurt's roof outlined his fair and slender figure. The sight was heart-stoppingly beautiful.

Yuxiu was an admirer of all things lovely, whether living or dead. In any other circumstances, he'd have tightened his grip on Cui Buqu's neck

and forced him to raise his head higher to admire the sight a moment longer.

Instead, he let go. Cui Buqu coughed violently and curled into a ball, gasping for air. He'd also been poisoned. Surely no one could remain so unconcerned about their own life. Yuxiu watched him coldly for a spell. Ignoring everything else, he sat down and began to regulate his qi and breathing.

He quickly realized Cui Buqu was telling the truth. Circulating his internal energy only aggravated the pain; Yuxiu soon felt like his chest was being stabbed by a thousand needles. Any contact on his skin was excruciating—even the brush of his clothes against his body was unbearable.

Cui Buqu was not a martial artist. How could he endure such torment?

Yuxiu was a martial artist of many achievements. He'd never before suffered such a setback. He gritted his teeth and searched Cui Buqu, but found only a silk pouch. Inside were a few pills that smelled of herbs.

"What is this?!" Yuxiu suspected it was the antidote, but he dared not take any chances. He grabbed two pills and shoved them into Cui Buqu's mouth, forcing him to swallow. Cui Buqu gave a gasping laugh.

"What's so funny?!" Yuxiu was furious. There was no trace of his former graceful bearing as he aimed a kick at Cui Buqu.

"That's medication for my asthma," said Cui Buqu. "You thought it was the antidote, but you couldn't be certain, could you?" He coughed. "It doesn't matter what you think. I was the one who hatched this scheme against you; why would I have the antidote on me?"

Seeing that Cui Buqu had consumed the pills without ill effects, Yuxiu was even more suspicious that they were the antidote. He took two pills, but when the pain in his chest remained, he knew that Cui Buqu hadn't been lying.

"Where's the antidote?! Give it to me, or I'll kill you!"

"It's with Feng Xiao." Cui Buqu's words came in starts and stops, but he was still smiling. "Didn't you send people to delay him? Knowing him,

if he dies, he'll destroy the antidote to ensure we both join him in the underworld."

Yuxiu raised his foot to kick Cui Buqu again. But when he saw the way Cui Buqu was gasping for breath, he changed his mind. One more kick might really send Cui Buqu to the underworld, and right now, Yuxiu needed him alive. Yuxiu sat back down. Enduring the pain, he closed his eyes and once again began circulating his qi.

Yet Cui Buqu refused to let either of them rest. "You say you aren't Yi-xiansheng, but you're certainly one of the leaders of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. You're not the first, but perhaps you're the second or third."

Yuxiu ignored him. But Cui Buqu didn't need an answer. He continued to theorize: "You were apprenticed to the Tiantai Sect and played advisor to the Prince of Jin. Your future was undoubtedly bright, yet you joined the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai to sow chaos across the land. When you threw in your lot with the Prince of Jin, you already had another goal. Time and again you've acted against the Sui dynasty, and now you're stirring up unrest in the Western Khaganate. Surely the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai don't believe they can conquer this land from the shadows with just a handful of people. You—"

His asthma struck again. He was under the influence of incense of helplessness; even those two pills could only temporarily relieve his discomfort. Talking was as difficult as ever. "Yuxiu-chanshi, do you remember Luhua Village?"

Yuxiu opened his eyes.

"Looks like I guessed right," said Cui Buqu with a smile. "Before joining the Tiantai Sect, you lived in Luhua Village. Because you were of foreign blood, the villagers treated you with contempt—until one day, a noble's entourage came and took you away."

Looking at Cui Buqu, Yuxiu said slowly, "Cui Buqu. Has anyone ever told you that opening your mouth at the wrong time will get you killed?"

"You and Feng Xiao are really quite alike," said Cui Buqu. "As you're already old acquaintances, why don't I play the role of witness when you swear your vow of brotherhood?"

“As soon as they bring me Feng Xiao’s corpse, you’re a dead man. Tread carefully if you want to enjoy these last moments of your life, lest I slip up and strangle you before then.” Yuxiu’s words were methodical; he was completely calm. Now that he was poisoned with the incense, screaming in fury wouldn’t change anything. It was smarter to conserve his strength and focus on prying the antidote’s whereabouts from Cui Buqu’s mouth.

“My investigations didn’t yield that noble’s name,” Cui Buqu continued. “But taking into account the year it took place and what happened to you afterward, it was likely Princess Qianjin, whom Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou gave away to the Eastern Khaganate in marriage.”

Yuxiu’s gaze upon him was that of a man looking at a corpse. But Cui Buqu remained unconcerned. When he had something to say, he’d say it, and only stop once he was satisfied.

“Princess Qianjin took pity on you, an isolated child with neither mother nor father. She brought you back to the Khaganate and personally taught you to read, and found someone to instruct you in martial arts. Years later, you left the Khaganate and wandered the Central Plains. After becoming a monk, you joined the Tiantai Sect as their disciple. A man of your talent will stand out wherever you go, so you quickly distinguished yourself there. At one point, you almost became their next leader.

“But you declined, claiming you lacked experience and wished to descend the mountain. The sect leader saw you as young but dependable, and made you head of Shangli Hall. This gave you access to all the men and resources the Tiantai Sect had amassed over the years to support you in your travels. Yet the first thing you did upon leaving the mountain was return to Luhua Village, where you massacred the inhabitants and burned the village to the ground.”

For a moment, Cui Buqu couldn’t go on. The pills had made it somewhat easier to breathe but did nothing to alleviate the effects of the incense of helplessness. Yuxiu was a martial artist; in comparison, he was far better off. Cui Buqu leaned back against a pillar for support, gathering his strength to continue.

“Remarkable,” said Yuxiu. “Your investigations touched on even Luhua Village. But tell me: I killed everyone in the village. How did you

come to know of this?”

“There was a woman at the time who’d newly married into the Zhou family from out of the village. She was visiting her parents back home at the time of the massacre, and escaped death. You didn’t know her, but the village and her in-laws had told her of your existence.”

“Ah,” said Yuxiu. “A minnow that slipped through the net. But what’s the use in digging up all this old history?”

“It’s very useful, of course,” said Cui Buqu. “For a start, I now know that your plans, and the plans of the Thirteen Floors, have some connection to Princess Qianjin. Finally the pieces fall into place. You obstructed us time and again. You attempted to steal the Jade of Heaven Lake; you disguised yourself as the khagan to spoil the alliance between Sui and the Western Khaganate, yet you made sure Fo’er’s side suffered losses as well. It’s because Princess Qianjin loathes the emperor for usurping the nation that once belonged to her Yuwen clan.”

Yuxiu burst out laughing. “You’re wrong. The princess has nothing to do with the Thirteen Floors. She shouldered her duty and married a Göktürk Khagan, knowing she would remain trapped in the Khaganate for the rest of her life. How would she have the means to make trouble in the Central Plains or found an organization like the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai? She doesn’t need to do anything. Whatever she wants, I’ll do it for her. My goals happen to align with the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai; why can’t I borrow their strength?

“Cui Buqu, oh, Cui Buqu. You boast of your cleverness, but why don’t you use your scheming mind to help the common people? Instead you spend your days bickering with Feng Xiao and trying to figure out what the emperor will do next. You allowed a weak woman to step up instead. It was she who was made to repair the relationship between the two nations. It was she who took on all the suffering that should have been yours!”

Yuxiu’s face twisted with hatred. He seemed to see the faces of all his enemies in Cui Buqu’s as he grabbed Cui Buqu’s collar and yanked him in, closing a hand around his throat once more.

Cui Buqu had thought to probe him for more secrets about the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai and the mastermind behind them. He hadn’t imagined he’d stumble upon Yuxiu’s greatest and most deeply buried secret

in the process—the handsome monk wearing Apa Khagan's face was a man deeply in love. And the one he loved was Princess Qianjin of the previous dynasty.

After Princess Qianjin was married off, the Northern dynasty changed hands from Zhou to Sui. The current emperor, Yang Jian, wasn't just any upstart noble. He had been the father-in-law of the emperor of Northern Zhou. Buttressed by the authority and influence of this position, he donned the emperor's yellow robes and slaughtered Princess Qianjin's entire family. There could exist no warmth or gentleness in the struggle for power, but Princess Qianjin had lost both her nation and her family. Of course she hated Great Sui.

Perhaps she'd fostered Yuxiu with the intention of creating a useful tool, or perhaps she returned his feelings sincerely. Either way, Yuxiu was willing to cross fire and flood for her, to treat the entire world as a game of chess and overturn the lives of countless innocents.

If the Tiantai Sect caught wind of this, they would expel him. His reputation would be destroyed, and the Prince of Jin would never employ him as a counselor again. The power he'd painstakingly built up and schemed for would go up like so much smoke.

As for the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai…

If Yuxiu wasn't Yi-xiansheng, who was the mastermind capable of giving this man orders? Was it Princess Qianjin? Or was there someone else?

All this flashed through Cui Buqu's mind as his thoughts grew increasingly hazy. Yuxiu's cold laugh rang in his ear. "Let me guess. There is no antidote for incense of helplessness—or if there is, neither of you have it with you. You've been trying to stall me until Feng Xiao can come to your rescue. Isn't that right?"

Cui Buqu closed his eyes. Yuxiu was a brilliant man. Keeping him occupied this long was an achievement; it had always been merely a matter of time until he discovered the truth.

His hand tightened slowly around Cui Buqu's neck. He was certain Feng Xiao wouldn't make it, and so he deliberately made Cui Buqu's death

slow, cutting off his air little by little, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a quick end.

Yuxiu's feelings toward Cui Buqu had always been complex. He enjoyed their battle of wits and admired the man's brilliant mind, on par with Yuxiu's own. He'd believed his disguise as the khagan to be flawless, yet Cui Buqu had seen through it.

Fortunately, he'd prepared for all contingencies. His plans were foolproof.

"I'd really prefer not to kill you. But unfortunately, I can't allow you to live." Yuxiu ignored the pain of the poison and channeled qi to his palm, ready to snap Cui Buqu's neck.

The sound of clashing weapons and angry shouts rose outside. Yuxiu gave a muffled groan, and his grip suddenly slackened.

# Chapter 83

ONE HOUR EARLIER, Feng Xiao, Qiao Xian, and Jinlian fought their assailants, three against many. Twelve figures in black were led by one figure in blue. All were top-tier martial artists, the leader in blue likely the strongest of the lot.

This wasn't the toughest or the trickiest battle of Feng Xiao's life. When he'd first left the mountains, he'd once dueled three of the top demonic experts on one of the summits of the Snow Mountains. That day, he'd proved himself their equal. He'd fought with his zither on the banks of the Wei River, thwarting his fellow practitioners' many attempts to kill him. His current opponents weren't the most troublesome he'd faced—but they clearly wanted to stop him from getting to Cui Buqu. The longer the battle dragged on, the more danger Cui Buqu would be in.

Qiao Xian understood this as well. She spared no effort trying to break out from the ring of their opponents, but her wounds had yet to heal—she lacked the strength to push through. Less than a dozen exchanges and she was gasping for breath.

The twelve fighters in black worked together seamlessly, their collective strength more than the sum of its parts. Jinlian and Qiao Xian were surrounded on all sides, while their enemies took turns meeting their attacks. They were soon exhausted; they had no energy to spare to help Feng Xiao.

With a toss of his sleeve, Feng Xiao shook off his opponent's weapons with another burst of internal energy, even as more glinting chains swept in toward him from all directions. Feng Xiao didn't retreat; he leaned aside to evade the strike, then leapt atop one of the thin chains and sprang into the air.

His opponent had expected this; he leapt after him in pursuit. They exchanged a dozen blows in midair, the wind from their palms whipping around them. Their robes billowed with true qi, snapping as they were caught in the whirling gales. Their palms moved faster and faster, until they were an indistinguishable blur.

Feng Xiao's opponent had known his target was no ordinary martial artist. But he'd been confident in his abilities; even if there was a gap, he'd been sure it was a small one. Besides, Yuxiu had told him Feng Xiao was injured—how could he lose? Only when they'd begun to fight did he realize he'd underestimated Feng Xiao. The man's skills were unfathomable. Even parrying Feng Xiao's basic palm strikes had pushed him to his limit. Finding his opponent much more difficult than expected, his confidence was sapped; in his panic, he lost the upper hand.

The man in blue took in Feng Xiao's dark clothes, his handsome face and elegant movements. Feng Xiao's expression was carefree, as if he wasn't engaged in a life-or-death battle but a casual spar. He gave no sign of being wounded.

Fine metal chains shot from blue sleeves like falling stars, or an arrow springing from a bow. Silent as soft rain, they flew toward Feng Xiao from both sides. Only when they struck their target would there be noise. In all his years wandering the jianghu, from the northern nations to the Central Plains, this move had never failed the man in blue. The chains were fine and flexible—two hands weren't enough to count the number of people who'd lost their lives to them. They wouldn't fail him this time either.

The man in blue didn't hesitate. He poured every ounce of his internal energy into the chains, which rushed toward Feng Xiao with unstoppable momentum, ready to splinter everything in their path like dry bamboo. Any human hand they struck would be destroyed, the flesh ripped apart and the bones shattered.

Feng Xiao had only two options: evade, or meet it head-on.

The man in blue had already sealed off all avenues of retreat. Unless Feng Xiao could take flight or sink into the ground, he had no choice but to take the blow barehanded. The moment his hands were injured, the man in blue would launch his next attack.

"I remember now," Feng Xiao said. Then he vanished.

The chains hit nothing but empty air.

*How could this be?* As the man stood in stunned disbelief, a wave of bloodlust swept up from behind him.

*Shit!*

Feng Xiao was no ghost or demon; he couldn't disappear, nor was this some arcane magic. He'd employed a technique used by ninjas in Yamato to confuse their enemies—an optical illusion, created by exploiting the human eye's limited field of vision. It wasn't at all mysterious once explained, but in that fraction of a second, the man in blue had fallen for it. The attack he'd staked everything on missed.

Lightning-quick, he turned and flung his chains out again. But in a fight between martial experts, that split second was enough to turn the tide. He'd lost his opportunity and handed the initiative to his opponent.

Feng Xiao's palm slammed into his back.

Blood spurted from the man in blue's mouth even as he lurched forward to avoid Feng Xiao's next attack.

"Without Cui Buqu here to remind me, I couldn't figure out who you were at first." Feng Xiao didn't give chase. Hands clasped behind his back, he strolled up to the man in blue. The steps he took looked ordinary, yet somehow, he moved a great distance with each one. No matter how quickly the man in blue fled, the distance between them remained unchanged.

"Your weapon is unusual, but your moves have much in common with Qin Miaoyu and Su Xing. Those two lack your skill and powerful internal energy; they weren't anywhere near my match. You, then, must be the leader of the Buyeo Sect, Go Un."

The man in blue neither confirmed nor denied Feng Xiao's guess. He'd known killing Feng Xiao would be difficult, but it was the sole reason he was here. If he couldn't take Feng Xiao's life today, he'd have failed. Still deliberating, he touched down on a tree in front of him and pushed off, turning sharply back toward Feng Xiao. His chains snaked through the air toward Feng Xiao's wrists and he leapt after them, aiming a kick at Feng Xiao's knee.

Jinlian saw the glint from the tip of the man in blue's boot. "His shoes!" she cried. But it was too late; the boot and its blade were about to sink into Feng Xiao's flesh. She hardly needed to think to guess it was tipped with deadly poison.

Several black-clad men surged forward, swords slashing toward Jinlian's face. She dodged, losing sight of Feng Xiao for a moment. When

she looked over again, what she saw made her heart stop.

Feng Xiao was collapsing backward—the poisoned blade had met its mark. Jinlian wailed internally. With no thought for the men pursuing her, she flew toward Feng Xiao. If he died, it was over. They could forget about rescuing Cui Buqu or restoring their honor; the three of them would perish here today.

Qiao Xian was of the same mind. The pair raced toward the crumpled figure of Feng Xiao—only to see him leap into the air. The whip sword at his waist gleamed as it streaked toward his opponent in an arc of light. As fluid as an ocean wave yet as strong as stone, it ran through the man in blue's chest in a single deadly strike and kept going, nailing itself to the trunk of the tree behind him.

Go Un had been certain his mission would succeed. He had never thought it would claim his life. His wide eyes were filled with resentment, boring into Feng Xiao even in death.

Qiao Xian was quick. She lunged forward and yanked the whip-sword out of the tree, then tossed it to Feng Xiao. He caught it deftly and charged into the formation of black-clad men without a backward glance. The loss of their leader had thrown them into disarray, and he fell upon them like a wolf on its prey. In the blink of an eye, several heads hit the ground.

These men were all under orders to fight to the death—even if it was a losing battle, there was no option of retreat. But of course some still valued their lives; those who tried to flee during the chaos met swift ends at the hands of Jinlian and Qiao Xian.

"Leave a few alive. Hold their jaws open!" called Feng Xiao. He strolled through the enemy formation, completely at ease, as if no one stood in his path.

His words were timely, and Qiao Xian was swift. She grabbed two of the men's lower jaws, preventing them from biting down on the poisonous pill in their mouths. "Leave this to us. Go save the lord chief!" she urged.

She'd also realized by now that anyone who gave orders to the leader of Buyeo Sect must be someone of immense power. Cui Buqu was in terrible danger.

“You’re not afraid I’ll push your lord chief around?” Feng Xiao chuckled. “You should be doing all you can to rescue him first. How could I take that from you?”

Qiao Xian ground her teeth, wishing she could grind Feng Xiao’s head too. “I beg of Deputy Chief Feng: please save our lord chief. I’ll serve you every day if that’s what it takes to repay you!”

“Unnecessary,” said Feng Xiao. “I have no interest in seeing that churlish face of yours every day. Just think—right now, your lord chief is almost certainly enduring all manner of torture. Maybe he’s even half-dead. Save your kindness for him during his darkest hour, when he’s in desperate need of help. You’ll get the most return for your goodwill that way. Don’t you agree?”

Qiao Xian was ready to burst into flames from rage. *You’re nothing but a conniving little weasel*, she thought. This man wouldn’t lift a finger unless there was something in it for him. The Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus were at odds, so why had she placed her hopes in Feng Xiao? She should have begged the lord chief to let Zhangsun Bodhi come along after all!

She wasted no more time on pointless words, but quashed her fury and dashed toward the yurt where Cui Buqu was detained. But within a scant few steps, she felt a pressure in her chest as the flow of her internal energy was blocked by her injury. She crashed to the ground, blood trickling from her mouth, and could move no more.

Feng Xiao smiled. “I see I have to do everything around here. Cui Buqu, oh, Cui Buqu, you owe me another gargantuan favor. However will you repay me this time?”

*Repay you my ass!* Qiao Xian snarled in silence.

Feng Xiao gave a good-natured laugh, then leapt out from the middle of those fallen black-clad men and arrowed toward the royal yurt. Within a few nimble bounds, his figure dwindled into the distance.

Struggling upright, Qiao Xian watched as two silhouettes burst from the yurt and soared into the blue sky.

One was Feng Xiao. As for the other…

“Khagan?!” Jinlian cried.

Everyone stared as, in broad daylight, the elderly Apa Khagan met Feng Xiao with qinggong so quick and light he could have plucked the very moon from the sky.

# Chapter 84

ALL GÖKTÜRKS grew up on horseback, and Apa Khagan was no exception. He too had been an experienced rider and archer in his youth. But as he grew old and indulged in wine and women, his skills had gradually deteriorated. He became an old khagan, his face weathered with age. Yet even at his peak, he hadn't been able to casually leap dozens of feet over Jinlian's head, let alone meet Feng Xiao in battle in midair. At the moment, the two appeared equally matched. The khagan was swift and lithe as the wind, unbending as a pine. He didn't look like an aging man at all.

Jinlian watched the scene in a trance for several shocked moments before regaining her senses. Few martial artists of this caliber existed—whoever that man was, it wasn't Apa Khagan!

Qiao Xian was a step ahead of her. "That bastard killed and impersonated the khagan! He wishes to throw the Khaganate into chaos!" she shouted.

High above the uproar, Feng Xiao and Yuxiu had already exchanged over a dozen blows. When they'd fought previously in Liugong City, Yuxiu had merely been testing the waters. This was a battle to the death. Yuxiu had set up this elaborate game of chess for the express purpose of sowing discord. He'd intended Fo'er's death at Feng Xiao's hands to incite enmity between the Western Khaganate and the Sui dynasty, which he could use to fan the flames of war between the two nations. But Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao had upset all his careful plotting. He wanted to grind their bones to dust.

Now that his identity was exposed, Yuxiu held nothing back. Every strike was brutal and brimming with bloodlust.

"So it's Yuxiu-chanshi!" Feng Xiao, too, had recognized him the moment they exchanged blows. Yuxiu was an enemy many times more challenging than Go Un, but Feng Xiao wasted no time provoking him, as if his dearest wish was to make him angry. "I have good news for you: Your accomplice Go Un is already dead!"

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” Yuxiu sneered. “He was a mediocre fighter, but at least he did one thing right!”

Go Un had been Goguryeo’s foremost martial artist, but talented fighters abounded in the Central Plains. Though he couldn’t rank among the best of the best, his skills had been top-notch. Feng Xiao might have killed him, but it couldn’t have been a painless victory.

Still, Yuxiu remained careful. Go Un had underestimated his enemy, but Yuxiu had a much better understanding of Feng Xiao’s strength. At this point, though there was no salvaging his plan, retreat remained possible. Only Feng Xiao stood in his way. Even if it cost Yuxiu extra time and effort, he had to kill Feng Xiao today if he hoped to make a clean escape.

Yuxiu was wielding a saber he’d taken from the yurt. It had been Prince Ade’s favored weapon, a blade of extraordinary make that glimmered in the sunlight. It wasn’t Yuxiu’s weapon of choice, but as a martial expert, he was proficient in a variety of weaponry. He wielded the gleaming blade with ease, as if it was an extension of his body. The saber’s glare and his true qi surged together into a colossal wave that crashed toward his opponent.

Engulfed in the saber’s mighty glare, Feng Xiao’s own sword glare appeared frail and small, almost overwhelmed by his opponent. For Jinlian, it was a nerve-wracking sight. Qiao Xian paid it no heed. She stumbled into the yurt, where she found Cui Buqu collapsed on the ground.

Cui Buqu’s face was white as paper, his breath a bare flutter. Qiao Xian felt for the pulse in his neck and went pale.

“Lord Chief! Wake up!” She channeled true qi into Cui Buqu in panic, calling to him again and again.

Cui Buqu didn’t move. After what seemed an age, he coughed and spat out a mouthful of blood.

“Lord Chief!” Qiao Xian was frantic.

“Stop passing me true qi,” said Cui Buqu. His voice was feeble as the buzz of a mosquito. “Don’t you smell the incense of helplessness…”

He had only used a small amount of incense of helplessness, and Feng Xiao and Yuxiu had torn open a hole in the top of the yurt; the scent

had mostly dissipated. It was only when Cui Buqu pointed it out that Qiao Xian detected it. She promptly became even more terrified.

Circulation of true qi aggravated the effects of incense of helplessness. Yuxiu had succumbed to it so quickly because he had been afraid and circulated his qi in desperation. Cui Buqu's body was frail but unable to accept any healing energy. Not only would Qiao Xian's true qi fail to alleviate his pain, it would make his symptoms worse.

While Qiao Xian and the others had been occupied with the Buyeo Clan, Cui Buqu had faced off against an equally cunning opponent. Yuxiu had known Cui Buqu was crafty and unpredictable, yet he'd made a common mistake—Cui Buqu wasn't a martial artist, and thus Yuxiu had dropped his guard. It had been Cui Buqu's idea to exploit this by throwing incense of helplessness into the mix. With this, he seized his victory over Yuxiu.

Eradicating his enemy by crippling himself was something only Cui Buqu would do. Yuxiu had underestimated Cui Buqu's ruthlessness. Had he not been occupied dueling Feng Xiao, he'd have been tearing Cui Buqu limb from limb at this moment.

Yet Qiao Xian felt no triumph. Typically, whenever Cui Buqu got up to his tricks, he'd always end up injured. How could Qiao Xian feel anything but anguish at seeing him hurt once again? Her voice trembled as she spoke. "I'll carry you outside and let you sit first."

"No, you need to go to Jinlian," said Cui Buqu. "Tell her to find Prince Yixun and have him calm people down. Yuxiu has impersonated the khagan. He must have made many subtle attempts to sway his people and stir up discord…"

He coughed, unable to continue. But Qiao Xian had worked for him for a long time; she understood. Yuxiu had been exposed, but the thorn bushes he'd planted would remain, ready to pierce the unwary. With Prince Ade dead, the first prince was the khagan's only living heir, but the Khaganate didn't strictly adhere to the idea that the son must inherit from the father. The more conservative nobles might see this as a chance to seize power. As things stood, the first prince was still well-disposed toward the Sui dynasty; it would benefit the alliance if he became khagan.

“Then you…” She was clearly reluctant to leave, but she didn’t dare touch Cui Buqu to move him, afraid she’d aggravate the pain of the poison.

“I won’t die,” said Cui Buqu. “Go!”

Qiao Xian gritted her teeth and got to her feet.

Cui Buqu listened to her retreating footsteps and the sounds of Feng Xiao and Yuxiu’s duel above him. He slowly closed his eyes.

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Yuxiu enjoyed games of skill and strategy, and particularly enjoyed playing against opponents of comparable ability. An opponent too far beneath him was like drinking a bowl of plain water, while a well-matched and talented rival was like partaking of a delectable, aged wine with a lingering aftertaste.

His hatred for Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu was nothing personal—especially not Cui Buqu. In fact, Yuxiu thought highly of him, and considered it a pity he’d been born too sickly to practice martial arts. He admired the meticulousness of his plots, and his ability to turn even the most desperate situation around. In another time and place, as different people, they might have had a friendly debate.

But today, here, blades danced and clashed. There could only be one victor.

Yuxiu and Feng Xiao had exchanged nearly a hundred moves. One had been poisoned by incense of helplessness; the other was injured and not at full strength. Each time Yuxiu attacked, he felt his true qi stutter and stagnate, hampering his every move, and his loathing toward Cui Buqu grew.

Just as Yuxiu didn’t often wield sabers, Feng Xiao didn’t often wield swords. His whip sword was a temporary replacement now that he had no zither to swing, but his exquisite swordsmanship and footwork were still unparalleled.

Yuxiu soon found himself in trouble.

Feng Xiao's sword glare undulated like the rolling mountains and rushing rivers, endless and without reprieve, hemming Yuxiu in with his inexhaustible internal energy. For now, Yuxiu was still holding his own, but he'd begun to realize he might not kill Feng Xiao today.

Not only that, Cui Buqu might survive.

Yuxiu was struck by an idea. He swept his shining saber up toward Feng Xiao's face. Feng Xiao danced back in retreat, only to see Yuxiu drop low. The saber shot from his hand, appearing as an arc of light as it flew toward Cui Buqu in the yurt. Without waiting for it to hit, Yuxiu charged at Feng Xiao. If Feng Xiao changed course to save Cui Buqu, he'd leave himself vulnerable. If he didn't, Cui Buqu was dead. Either way, it was Yuxiu's victory.

A sneer pulled at the corner of Yuxiu's mouth. His palm rushed toward Feng Xiao's chest, infused with internal energy.

In the next instant, the sneer froze on his face. Feng Xiao's sword glare was too fast. Its dazzling shine seared Yuxiu's vision; he instinctively blinked. A sharp pain radiated from his forehead and spread to his left eye. He gave a muffled groan and swept back unthinkingly as a crisp chime sounded in his ear.

But the whip sword didn't claim his life—it kept flying, streaking down to slice the saber into two. The tip of the saber was already at Cui Buqu's throat; as it fell away, a few drops of blood welled up where it'd broken skin. Had Feng Xiao been a fraction of a second later, Cui Buqu would have been no more.

This one strike had exhausted Feng Xiao's true qi. All he could do was watch as Yuxiu drifted away and landed on a flagpole at a safe distance to gather his strength. Moments later, he swept away and was gone within a few bounds.

By now, most of the observers had pulled themselves together. Jinlian led a handful of Göktürk guards in pursuit, but Yuxiu was no ordinary man. Feng Xiao knew they'd never catch him—and even if they did, they couldn't stop him.

Feng Xiao floated down from another flagpole and alighted beside Cui Buqu. He gave Cui Buqu's shoulder a poke. "Are you dying?"

Cui Buqu didn't move.

Feng Xiao sighed. "Was I too late?" He poked Cui Buqu's forehead. It was cool to the touch. "Oh, so your corpse has gone cold? What wonderful news. On my return to the capital, I'll petition the emperor to abolish the Zuoyue Bureau."

Cui Buqu's eyes fluttered open. *If you'd lain on the ground for half a day, you'd be fucking cold too*, he thought. But he truly lacked the strength to speak. Even during that life-threatening confrontation earlier, he hadn't been able to move an inch.

Qiao Xian rushed over with several Göktürk maids and a palanquin and tried to help Cui Buqu stand. Her movements were cautious and timid, afraid to hurt Cui Buqu more by moving him. A frown creased Cui Buqu's brow.

"So you can still frown," said Feng Xiao in surprise. "Your body hasn't gone cold yet after all. Ah well. As they say, escort the buddha the entire journey west. I shall humble myself this time!"

With that, he plucked Cui Buqu out of Qiao Xian's arms and slung him onto his back, then began walking toward the yurt they'd been staying in. "Daoist Master Cui," he said. "I have something I wish to discuss with you."

Cui Buqu closed his eyes and rested his chin on Feng Xiao's shoulder, feigning sleep.

"Next time you decide to risk your life with your shenanigans, I'd prefer you let me know in advance. Or if not, make sure to die somewhere out of my sight and save me the condolence money. Our Jiejian Bureau hasn't much to spare. I hope you understand."

Cui Buqu remained silent, as though he'd passed out entirely. But Feng Xiao had seen his eyelids twitch when he first picked him up, his eyes rolling beneath closed lids. "Don't pretend; I know you're awake. I'm telling you, the debt you owe me this time couldn't be repaid in thirty lifetimes, even if you paid it with your body."

Cui Buqu breathed a faint sigh and finally managed to crack his eyes open. “What about forty lifetimes?”

Feng Xiao snorted. “I fear you’ll die in my bed. Enough nonsense. The moment you can walk, go fetch me the zither Yuyin.”

“Yuyin is a precious treasure of the Cui clan of Boling. It’s not something I can simply fetch whenever I want.”

“Don’t forget your promise to me. If you refuse to keep your part of the deal, I have a hundred ways of not keeping mine.”

“I promised, so of course I’ll get it. Once we leave here, we’ll go to Anping.”

Anping was the home of the Cui clan of Boling. He’d had Cui Buqu’s word, yet Feng Xiao still felt like something was off. Cui Buqu had offered Yuyin to him back in Qiemo, but at the time, Feng Xiao hadn’t expected to have to save him from such a troublesome man as Yuxiu. He’d paid a hefty price, and his only reward was this zither. Any way he cut it, it felt like he’d been scammed.

“If you know where Yuyin is, then what about other zithers? Haozhong or Jiaowei—”

Cui Buqu coughed a mouthful of blood up onto his shoulder. “I might not live much longer,” he said serenely, then let his head fall and played dead.

Feng Xiao was speechless.

# Chapter 85

WHEN CUI BUQU awoke, he suspected for a moment that, while unconscious, he'd been transported from the grasslands beyond the Great Wall to the misty plains of Jiangnan. Why else would a beautiful woman suddenly appear at his bedside?

There were all types of beautiful women in the world. Some were bold and striking, some composed and refined, some humble and sweet. Cui Buqu had seen them all, and in fact had one by his side. Qiao Xian was aloof and untouchable, a plum tree blooming atop a lofty mountain.

But the beauty before him now was different. She was a brook babbling through the grasslands, limpid, fresh, and sparkling. In contrast to Qiao Xian's cool loveliness, she had an air of fragility like a snow lotus swaying in the breeze. Anyone who saw her would want to protect her.

At this moment, she was dreamily watching him from the side of the bed. When she saw he was awake, her eyes lit up. "Is my lord thirsty?" she asked softly. "Allow me to pour you some water."

Cui Buqu watched as she picked up the kettle and filled a cup to the brim. She approached him, the cup clasped carefully between her hands. "Please drink, my lord."

He didn't move.

The beauty fidgeted slightly under his gaze. "I don't mean anything by it, my lord," she said. "Qiao-niangzi is preparing your medicine right now and had to step away. That's why I came to help. Ask me for anything you want, my lord; just don't send me away!"

"Anything I want?" Cui Buqu's throat was dry, his voice low and hoarse. But the beauty was right at his side; she had no trouble hearing him.

"Of course! Anything you want!" She leaned closer, her eyes shining. The faint scent of orchids hung around her.

Cui Buqu thought for a moment. "Get on the table and dance."

"What dance does my lord wish to see?"

“You choose.”

The beauty had hoped to speak with him further rather than dance. But Cui Buqu wasn’t interested. He’d just woken up yet insisted on watching a dance. The beauty had no choice but to set down the teacup and step barefoot onto the table. Kucheans were known to be excellent dancers. The woman bent at the waist and spun on her toes, clapping out a rhythm as she danced. The bells at her ankles jingled, and the hem of her skirt fluttered in a graceful arc that revealed her alluring, snow-white feet. All that was missing was musical accompaniment—though beautiful, the performance felt incomplete.

Cui Buqu watched for a while until his eyes slipped shut again. But every time the girl thought he’d fallen asleep and she could rest, he’d open them again. All she could do was steel herself and keep dancing. This happened several times, until the beauty timidly said, “My lord, I’m afraid a bit tired. May I stop dancing?”

He yawned. “You can stop and do something else.”

“Would my lord like something to eat?” she asked eagerly.

“You needn’t go anywhere,” said Cui Buqu. “Just do a handstand on the table.”

The beauty was speechless.

“My lord, my apologies, but I’m wearing a skirt. Doing a handstand would be indecent,” she protested feebly. She understood Cui Buqu had just woken up after grave injury. Even if he desired her, he lacked the stamina for any vigorous activity and could only feast his eyes on her. It had been the same with the old khagan, but at least he’d enjoyed having her wait upon him, indulging in the pleasure of eating and drinking from her delicate hands.

Why were her methods so completely ineffective on these two Central Plainsmen? If she hadn’t seen the merchants from the Central Plains stop in their tracks to stare at her, she’d have thought a woman was only considered beautiful in the Central Plains if she had three eyes and two noses.

“Oh,” said Cui Buqu. “Then why not pretend to be a monkey stealing a peach?”

The beauty blinked at him.

“Or mimic a chicken and stand on one leg?”

The girl’s eyes welled with tears.

Cui Buqu regarded her listlessly. *You said you’d do anything, but all you can do is dance.* He coughed. “Go fetch Qiao Xian.”

A soft chuckle drifted down from the rafters.

The beauty watched in shock as a black-clad man dropped down in front of her. “You’d have had an easier time with the first prince,” Feng Xiao said.

The beauty bit her lip and glared sullenly at Feng Xiao, who didn’t spare her a glance. He strolled over to the dresser and studied his reflection in the basin of water there, tilting his head this way and that and muttering words of appreciation. “The truly dazzling are pitifully few in number. Real beauty comes from within. Daoist Master Cui already has a pearl before him. Why should he be interested in you? Don’t you agree, Daoist Master Cui?”

Cui Buqu closed his eyes. His head was swimming and he wanted to vomit, but his stomach was empty, so he merely sat in agony.

As far as the Kuchean beauty was concerned, one of these men was a narcissist who looked down his nose at everyone he encountered, while the other was not only unmoved when a beauty fell into his lap, but even looked for fresh ways to torment her. Both of them were insane.

She waited a while, but neither asked her to stay. At last, she excused herself and left, dejected and humiliated.

“The king of Kucha sent that woman to serve the khagan,” said Feng Xiao. “Anyone close to the Göktürk nobles lives a cushy life by the standards of the Khaganate, but it hardly compares to the luxuries of the Central Plains. Now that the khagan is dead and the Western Khaganate is in turmoil, she’s unsure where she stands. Rather than staying to serve a new khagan, she’d prefer to travel to the Central Plains with us. Unfortunately for her, she tried to seduce first me and then you, and came up empty both times. If only that fool Pei Jingzhe were here, she might have gotten her wish.”

Cui Buqu had suspected as much. As soon as he'd seen she was only looking for a meal ticket, he'd lost any interest he might have had in her. Feng Xiao had merely validated his opinion. He opened his mouth and said hoarsely, "I'm thirsty."

Feng Xiao gave him a puzzled look. "What does that have to do with me? I saved your life. Instead of getting out of bed and kneeling at my feet in thanks, you want me to serve you water?"

Fatigue weighed heavily on Cui Buqu. He stared blankly at Feng Xiao and counted silently: *ten, nine, eight…three, two, one.*

Feng Xiao picked up the kettle. "One question per sip."

It was a fair deal. Cui Buqu nodded.

Feng Xiao poured some water into a cup and handed it to Cui Buqu. When Cui Buqu looked down, he saw the water barely covered the bottom of the cup. It really was only one sip, no more and no less.

"What did you uncover about Yuxiu while you were with him?" Feng Xiao asked.

"Not much."

Feng Xiao's lips twitched. "With that attitude, you must not want a second sip."

"He's a member of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai—and not a low-ranking one, either."

"Yi-xiansheng?"

"Water."

"We're still on the first question," Feng Xiao drawled. "Don't even think about cheating. Keep stalling and I'll gag you and take you up to the roof so you can sip the northern winds instead. We'll see how long it takes Qiao Xian to find you."

Cui Buqu considered this seriously and decided Feng Xiao would do it. "He said he wasn't. Under the circumstances, I don't see why he'd lie."

Satisfied with this answer, Feng Xiao helped him take a second sip of water. "Tell me your theories. All of them."

“Princess Qianjin adopted and raised him, and he’s deeply indebted to her for her kindness. The princess loathes the Sui dynasty, so he is determined to overthrow it. His position as the Prince of Jin’s counselor helps him implement his plans.”

Feng Xiao rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “He wants to overturn nations, and the Thirteen Floors are ambitious as well. Their goals happen to coincide. But people like Go Un and Feng Xiaolian wouldn’t be content with simply causing chaos. They must have a larger goal. Perhaps Yuxiu is simply seeking revenge for his princess, or perhaps he’s lying. It doesn’t matter. The members of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai are big names themselves; they’re unlikely to indulge Yuxiu’s lunacy for the sake of it. They must have a grander plan, one they’ve been executing step-by-step—don’t you agree?”

Beneath the surface where they couldn’t see, a massive conspiracy was taking shape. They couldn’t predict where or when it would rear its head.

The cryptic verses they’d found on Duan Qihu were a crucial clue. Feng Xiao was sure Cui Buqu had been privately mulling them over. Some parts that had made no sense at the time must have become clear to him by now.

Yet when Feng Xiao turned to ask his next question, he found Cui Buqu had closed his eyes and lain back down. The blanket was tucked up beneath his chin, the picture of peaceful slumber. All his face was missing were the words, *I don’t know.*

# Chapter 86

THANKS TO YUXIU'S conspicuous escape, everyone knew Apa Khagan had been murdered. The fate of the Black Moon Shaman's burnt corpse was discussed again—no one could be sure whether the corpse had really been that of the shaman, or whether Yuxiu had planted the body of the khagan there after he'd killed him. Unfortunately, the body itself had been caught in a fire, then burned to ashes with the cremation. Unless the khagan himself returned to life or walked in someone's dreams to reveal the answer, no one would ever know the truth.

Apa Khagan had been old and short-sighted, but over the years, he'd managed to maintain a delicate equilibrium within his domain. With him gone, dark thoughts and ambitions began to stir. At the same time, the two Sui envoys had transformed from suspects in the murder of Prince Ade to dignitaries worshipped and flattered by all.

The Kuchean beauty's attempt to win over Cui Buqu merely proved her intelligence. In the following days, wealthy people of all ranks came from across the Western Khaganate to visit Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao. The stream of them seemed endless, and at times, it was a miracle the yurt didn't rupture. The gifts they brought piled into mountains, and some visitors even brought livestock such as lambs and calves.

When Feng Xiao arrived, he found Qiao Xian giving orders to some Göktürk servants Prince Yixun had sent to help pack their bags. Cui Buqu was sitting on the sidelines, a cup of milk tea in hand. He looked even more haggard and listless than the day before.

"Does Daoist Master Cui so deeply regret turning away the Kuchean beauty yesterday that he can't sleep?" Feng Xiao didn't act like a guest. Without waiting for his host's invitation, he took a seat beside Cui Buqu and poured a cup for himself.

The milk in this case was actually cream, and the tea had been brought by merchants from the Central Plains. The people of the Central Plains often added salt and star anise to their teas, but in the Khaganate it was more typical to add cane sugar. The richness of the milk mingled with

the sweet and refreshing tea to create a satisfying drink with its own unique flavor.

It was true Cui Buqu hadn't slept well. There were bruised purple smudges beneath his eyes, and his brows were heavy with fatigue, like a persistent cloud that refused to lift.

He'd turned away everyone who'd come bearing gifts to pay their respects, but no few had insisted on making a racket at the door. Combined with the effects of the poison that had yet to fade, the last two nights had been agonizing. He lacked the strength to argue even with Feng Xiao. Coolly, he said, "Once this matter is concluded, we can depart for the Central Plains in the next two days. What say you?"

"You're the lord chief," Feng Xiao replied nonchalantly. "Naturally you have the final word. I'm here to take a piece of the credit, not your job." He snapped open his fan and was about to wave it when he caught a sideways glance at the man swaddled in fox furs beside him. He paused and extended a hand, tilting Cui Buqu's chin up with his fan. "If you continue losing weight, you'll cross over before we even make it back to the capital," he said, voice thick with glee.

Cui Buqu pushed the fan aside. "I'll send these people to harass you instead. Then we'll see who can sleep. You only got any rest because I was serving as your shield. Enough with the verbal jabs!"

Daoist Master Cui had an awful temper, but he was usually capable of at least pretending to be calm and collected. That his emotions were so rawly out in the open now was a testament to how miserable this bout of illness had made him.

Feng Xiao withdrew the fan and took hold of Cui Buqu's wrist, feeling for his pulse. Though he'd anticipated the result, he managed to be surprised anyway. "Your pulse is so weak and irregular, yet you're still capable of snapping at me. Why, you're a medical miracle."

"My pulse has been like this every day for over twenty years," said Cui Buqu. "Sometimes it's better and sometimes it's worse, that's all." Irritated, he yanked his hand away and wrapped the furs tighter around himself. It was getting toward summer, and the days were growing warmer. Not only had Feng Xiao changed into thinner robes, even the Göktürks had removed their furs. The inside of the yurt was stifling. If not for Feng

Xiao's martial prowess, he'd have sweated through his robes by now. Yet Cui Buqu was still cold.

"Don't be in such a rush to leave," said Cui Buqu. "The khatun and her son are sure to visit and ask for an alliance today. You're the deputy envoy. Let's receive her together."

Before these words, Feng Xiao had almost forgotten the purpose of their trip. They hadn't come to fight Yuxiu and expose the fake khagan, but to represent the Sui dynasty and forge an alliance with the Western Khaganate—an alliance they'd need to face off against another powerful force, Ishbara Khagan, who controlled more than half the Khaganate.

Cui Buqu had spoken of the devil, and soon he appeared. Minutes later, an attendant at the door reported that Prince Yixun and the two khatuns had arrived to pay their respects to the Sui envoys.

This was the Göktürk's territory. The first prince and the khatuns could simply have entered, but instead they followed the etiquette of the Central Plains and respectfully waited outside for an invitation. No, not the first prince—Prince Yixun was now the new khagan of the Western Khaganate. Even Qiao Xian marveled at his drastic change in circumstance.

With Cui Buqu's permission, Prince Yixun, the greater khatun, and Jinlian entered the yurt.

The great prince held his right fist over his heart and bowed to Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao. "If not for you both, that scoundrel would have pulled the wool over our eyes completely. I can't fathom what chaos the Khaganate would be in now. On behalf of the entire Western Khaganate, we thank you deeply for your help. This is a kindness we cannot repay. Tell me what you desire; as long as it's in my power to grant it, I will."

"The first prince need not be so courteous," said Cui Buqu.

Feng Xiao sneered. "We proposed an alliance the day we arrived, yet every one of you was full of excuses. You either shut the door in our faces or watched coldly from the sidelines. If Cui Buqu hadn't identified Yuxiu in time, we'd likely be dead now."

As Jinlian translated Feng Xiao's words, a look of embarrassment came over Prince Yixun's face. He hadn't endorsed the khagan's attempts to keep a foot in both camps when it came to Ishbara and the Sui dynasty, but

neither had he lent a hand when Feng Xiao and his companions met with trouble. Now that Feng Xiao had put it so bluntly, his face burned with shame.

“Jinlian has shared a saying from the people of the Central Plains,” the greater khatun said gently. “After a sheep is lost, mend the fold to save the flock—we can still remedy our mistake and prevent greater loss. It’s true we have been at fault. Today we are here to apologize and ask that you be generous with your forgiveness. We extend our hand to the Sui dynasty with utmost sincerity, and swear we will never betray you.”

No such promises could last forever. Today, Prince Yixun was wholeheartedly throwing his lot in with the Sui dynasty, yet who knew what the future might hold? But this had nothing to do with Cui Buqu. His job was to ensure the Western Khaganate was sincere in their pledge of friendship in the present, and that they’d assist the Sui dynasty in the looming war. That was enough.

Fo’er was dead; Yuxiu had fled, seriously injured. If Prince Yixun wished to secure his position as khagan, he needed strong allies to support him. Right now, the Sui dynasty was his only option.

Before Cui Buqu could respond, the first prince called for someone to bring the letter of alliance and a seal. The letter was earnestly written, one he’d personally penned. He read out the contents, then dripped wax onto the paper and used the horn-shaped gemstone he carried with him to stamp it with his seal.

“This is a special token of the khagan’s,” Jinlian explained. “It’s only used for the most important matters. The first prince is demonstrating the depth of his sincerity. Cui-xiansheng, please take a look at the document before making your decision. It’s not too late to do so.”

Cui Buqu took the letter but merely glanced at it before handing it to Feng Xiao.

The prince thought Cui Buqu too angry to bother with a closer read. Displeased, he said, “Starting with myself, all new khagans will gladly receive titles of nobility from the Sui dynasty. Is that not enough for you, Cui-langjun?”

Prince Yixun was much more astute than his father. He'd spent the past few days asking Jinlian much about the Sui dynasty. He knew such titles were only decorative; Sui would never send troops this far, so the ruling authority would still belong to him. In this way, he could demonstrate his sincerity and encourage further trade between the Khaganate and the Sui imperial court. The Göktürk aristocrats could no longer live without their silks and porcelain, after all. The better their relationship with the Sui dynasty, the more goods would flow between them, which Prince Yixun could use to increase his popularity.

Such calculations were typical of vassal states throughout history; the first prince's actions were in no way unique or greedy. From what Cui Buqu understood of the imperial court, the emperor would be only too happy to agree.

"I read it," he said. "You said you'll travel with me to the capital of Sui to demonstrate your intentions. When the emperor learns of this, he'll be delighted. I shall write my own letter to the imperial capital, and your words will be reported to the emperor. The Ministry of Rites will begin preparations to welcome the new khagan."

Cui Buqu then recited the entire letter of alliance from beginning to end, without missing a word. Realization finally dawned on the first prince. It wasn't that Cui Buqu hadn't read the letter properly; this man possessed the ability of total recall.

Prince Yixun's remaining doubts went up like smoke, and he saluted once more. "Then I'll leave everything to Cui-langjun."

Their people had already lost to Feng Xiao in martial arts, and even if they combed through the entire Western Khaganate, they wouldn't find a man as brilliant as Cui Buqu. What else could he say? He had to accept the situation with good grace.

With the support of Jinlian and the greater khatun, Prince Yixun swiftly quashed the dissenting voices in the tribe and took up the mantle of the new khagan. Cui Buqu and the others were guests of honor at the ceremony, where they were worshipped like immortals; no one dared show them an ounce of disrespect. The treatment was a stark contrast to the storms they'd weathered when they first arrived.

Afterward, the new khagan set off with Jinlian, Cui Buqu, and the rest of their party on their journey to the Central Plains. His mother, the greater khatun, stayed behind to watch over his domain.

The journey home was nothing like their journey to the Khaganate. Not only did they ride alongside a Göktürk khagan, they were accompanied by a winding convoy of Göktürk guards and gifts. Traveling in such a mighty procession, the road home was smooth and uneventful, devoid of any dangers.

As a gesture of goodwill and at Cui Buqu's request, the new khagan had also released most of the Han slaves they'd captured. These men and women also journeyed with the convoy, but they certainly couldn't follow them all the way to the capital. Cui Buqu arranged for them to stay in Liugong City.

County Magistrate Zhao of Liugong City had received word of their coming and appeared to greet them in person. He brought with him an imperial decree.

News of Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao reclaiming Qiemo had reached the capital. The emperor was said to be delighted and wished to reward them, but the pair had rushed off to the Western Regions before the imperial decree could arrive. Now they'd successfully treated with the Western Khaganate and returned with the new khagan, another remarkable achievement. That news, however, had yet to reach the capital; any further reward was still some ways off. The decree Magistrate Zhao held was one that rewarded them for their victory in Qiemo, raising them both to the rank of marquis and promising a sum of gold.

"My lords must have had a long journey. To think you'd have managed yet another amazing feat! When the emperor hears of this, he's sure to bestow another reward. How unfortunate that my humble self has duties here and cannot accompany you to the capital. All I can do is welcome you with food and drink. Please enter our city and claim your well-deserved rest!"

Magistrate Zhao's smile was more radiant than a summer peony. He called up all the compliments he'd learned over his decades of study and lavished them upon Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao. He'd completely forgotten

the words he'd muttered to himself as he'd watched them leave for Qiemo: *The only place those idiots are going is to their graves.*

Though Qiemo was now part of Great Sui, it had been outside the empire's control for a long time; it lacked the flavor of a Central Plains city. Liugong City was a border town without even a tenth of the capital's bustling wealth, yet it wasn't until they passed through these city gates that they truly entered the borders of the Sui dynasty.

The moment they set foot in the city, Feng Xiao felt Cui Buqu relax.

Cui Buqu had been on alert the entire return trip, worried Yuxiu might rear his head once again. Now that they'd reached Liugong City, they'd have an escort of Sui soldiers for the remainder of the journey. Relieved of this worry, his illness crashed back down on him like a mountain, leaving him unable to attend Magistrate Zhao's welcome banquet that night.

# Chapter 87

COUNTY MAGISTRATE Zhao was drowning in regret.

When Feng Xiao had arrived in Liugong City, he'd come as himself. But Cui Buqu had been posing as the leader of Zixia Monastery, giving no hint as to his true identity and status. County Magistrate Zhao's hands had been full trying to please Feng Xiao; he'd almost entirely ignored Cui Buqu. Only later had he learned Cui Buqu's authority was no less than that of the deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau.

County Magistrate Zhao wasn't a high-ranking official, but he knew as well as anyone that when two officials of similar rank arrived, flattering one and snubbing the other was a bad idea.

Rumor was, the Zuoyue Bureau possessed the prerogative to act first and report later, just like the Jiejian Bureau.

Rumor was, the Zuoyue Bureau had been founded by Empress Dugu herself, and that they answered directly to her.

Rumor was, the lord chief of the Zuoyue Bureau was as elusive as a ghost. He never appeared in court, and almost no one had ever met him. He was even reputed to be a close confidant of the empress.

Rumor was…

Magistrate Zhao hadn't heard of the Zuoyue Bureau before, but after reading the letters from his friends in the capital, he'd been thrown into a panic. It seemed he'd unwittingly offended a terrifying man. Even if only one in ten of those rumors were true, one thing was certain: The deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau treated Cui Buqu like an equal, which meant his rank was a high one. Thus, when Cui Buqu didn't show up at the banquet that night, County Magistrate Zhao didn't dare take offense. Instead, he wracked his brains for more ways to recover from his initial faux pas.

When he heard Cui Buqu was ill and had suffered an injury in the Khaganate, he sent a large quantity of medicinal herbs to the relay station where Cui Buqu and his party were staying. Qiao Xian turned it away. Cui

Buqu's body was currently too weak for medicine; he couldn't eat anything other than soup and plain congee.

County Magistrate Zhao next wanted to send over a famed doctor but gave up on the idea when he heard Chief Cui's subordinate, Qiao-niangzi, was herself an expert in medicine. If he invited a doctor, he'd probably end up offending her too. He strained to think of some way to make Cui Buqu happy—yet he couldn't come up with anything. His hair was practically falling out from the stress, and at night he tossed and turned so much his wife almost kicked him out of bed.

Cui Buqu's stay in Liugong City was intended to be a short one, as they were making preparations to set off for the capital in a few days. Magistrate Zhao therefore had no choice but to ask Feng Xiao for advice. In comparison to Cui Buqu, who seemed as immovable as stone, the deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau was a much easier man to flatter. At the very least, he'd never rejected any of Magistrate Zhao's gifts.

When the magistrate went to pay his respects to Feng Xiao, he was confident he could make inroads with him—until he saw the beautiful serving girl he'd sent wiping down a window frame.

Magistrate Zhao thought for a moment he'd gone blind. He stared, dumbfounded.

The serving girl noticed Magistrate Zhao's arrival and gave him a look full of unspoken grievance. Her eyes brimmed with tears, a pitiful sight.

The offender was sitting by the window focused on reading a book as if it contained a celestial maiden even lovelier than the beauty standing next to him.

The girl's flower-like beauty was so stunning Magistrate Zhao had been unable to bring himself to make use of her when he'd first received her as a gift. Of course, his wife being as ferocious as a tiger was also a limiting factor. Regardless, the magistrate was willing to swear on his life that this girl was the most beautiful woman in Liugong City. Even Feng Xiao, who normally resided in the capital and had outrageously high standards, was sure to be moved by her face.

Yet now he came to find that this man had ordered such a beautiful woman do manual labor like a common maid. It was a criminal waste.

A thought rose unbidden in the magistrate's heart. *Could it be that Feng Xiao doesn't like women, but instead likes…*

"Do you regret sending me this beauty, Magistrate Zhao? Feel free to take her back." Feng Xiao didn't even look up as he turned the page.

"No, no, of course not!" the magistrate protested, shooing the girl out of the room. He approached Feng Xiao with a smile and whispered, "Dare I ask my lord, did she not serve you well? Was she unable to satisfy you?"

"Not at all; I'm quite satisfied," said Feng Xiao. "Look—hasn't she made this window spotless?"

County Magistrate Zhao hadn't sent over a beauty among beauties to clean windows! He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "But this humble official heard you didn't take her to bed last night. She waited outside your rooms all evening."

Fortunately the weather was growing warmer and the late spring breeze was gentle, so the courtyard hadn't been cold. Otherwise, that fragile flower would have surely caught a chill.

Feng Xiao sighed. "Oh, so she was supposed to be my bed companion. I thought you sent her to do chores. I was going to have her clean the floor next."

"Qi-niang is the most beautiful woman in my employ, but if she doesn't please you, allow me to send someone else. Or perhaps you'd prefer a young man instead…?"

Feng Xiao sighed again and pointed at his own face. "What do you think of my looks?" he asked.

"My lord, you're as resplendent as a phoenix, as radiant as a dragon. Like an immortal from beyond our human realm!" the magistrate hastened to say.

"Would you be enchanted by someone uglier than yourself?"

The magistrate was speechless, but he couldn't argue with his logic. "But my lord," he said miserably, "you are gallant and dashing, while that young lady is gentle and charming. There's no comparison between you.

Besides, I fear vanishingly few people in the world possess a face more outstanding than yours!”

Feng Xiao sneered. “Then forget such stuff and focus on your official duties!”

County Magistrate Zhao finally understood that the exquisite woman he could scarcely bear to part with was worthless to Feng Xiao. *Why don’t I gift you a mirror instead?* he grumbled to himself, though he didn’t dare say it. He merely smiled and nodded agreeably. “In that case, this humble official also wishes to ask for advice. Seeing as you’re such good friends with Cui-langjun, do you perhaps know what he likes?”

“Good friends?” Feng Xiao quirked a brow in confusion. “Us?”

“Are you not?” asked the magistrate anxiously.

Suddenly Feng Xiao smiled. “Of course we are. You wish to send him a gift as well? Why not send him a beautiful woman too? That should suffice.”

“Your lordship jests.” Magistrate Zhao gave a pained smile. “Cui-langjun is currently bedridden and couldn’t enjoy the company of a woman even if he wanted to. I’ve already sent him money and supplements, but that maid of his rejected them all. I was too blind to realize who Cui-langjun was before. I wish to make amends, but I don’t know where to start. All I can do is approach you in shame and ask for advice. Please give me guidance.”

Feng Xiao smiled. “You’ve come to the right man. Cui Buqu remains aloof and indifferent no matter whom he’s talking to. But I’ll tell you in confidence, I’ve seen him…”

He lowered his voice and whispered a few words. Magistrate Zhao’s eyes widened. “Surely not?”

“Perhaps all capable people have some…strange predilections they can’t show to outsiders.”

Magistrate Zhao considered how Feng Xiao had disdained the beautiful serving girl and had to nod. “You may be right! I’ll go look for one now. Thank you very much, Feng-langjun!”

As soon as he had gone, Feng Xiao beckoned the beauty over. Qi-niang saw his pleased expression and thought he'd finally learned to appreciate her. Overjoyed, she approached gracefully and bowed. "How may I serve my lord?"

"Go see if Cui Buqu has awoken."

…*That's all?* she thought.

"Why are you just standing there?" asked Feng Xiao.

Indignation pricked at Qi-niang's heart. "This one has a stomachache." She pouted.

"Then go after you've been to the toilet."

Qi-niang was struck speechless. The handsome lord didn't even bother to glance at her. Furious, she stamped her foot and left.

Feng Xiao stretched languidly and decided to head out for a stroll.

Qi-niang had mentally cursed Feng Xiao dozens of times, grumbling that he was blind, but she dared not disobey him. When he returned, she reported that Cui Buqu was awake and entertaining an endless parade of visitors. Even Magistrate Zhao had hurried over.

While investigating the missing Jade of Heaven Lake, Feng Xiao had been high-handed and imperious. He'd openly feuded with Linlang Pavilion despite the powers that stood behind them, which had left a deep impression on many. At the time, quite a few had come to fawn over him and offer gifts; unfortunately, Feng Xiao was like a stone and simply sent them away with a wave of his hand. The lesson was still fresh in their minds and consequently, the number of fools who came to disturb him this time had lessened considerably.

As for Cui Buqu, he'd been presiding over the Zixia Monastery at the time. The monastery had been bursting with incense and visitors for the months of his tenure, then suddenly collapsed overnight. The abbot of the monastery had quietly disappeared, and the citizens were still talking about it. Some said the abbot had ascended to the heavens, while others said he was a fraud who'd fled after scamming enough honest people out of their money.

Now the man in question had reappeared, transformed into an envoy of the court. He'd traveled to the Khaganate with Feng Xiao and returned a marquis. Everyone was stunned, and the number of his callers exploded. Not all of them went to flatter and give gifts. Some simply wanted a piece of the excitement, while others felt themselves indebted to him, or were past patients who came to thank him.

All of them were stopped at the door by Qiao Xian. Other than necessary exceptions like Magistrate Zhao, very few actually laid eyes on Cui Buqu.

Feng Xiao rubbed his chin and decided to go watch the fun.

The two of them were staying in the same relay station, one on the east side and the other on the west. If they didn't go expressly to visit each other, it was easy to pass the entire day without a single meeting. Cui Buqu clearly hadn't missed the companion with whom he'd shared so much weal and woe over the past weeks. When Feng Xiao entered uninvited, his expression wasn't one of pleased surprise. Instead, his lips thinned.

A smile tugged at the corner of Feng Xiao's mouth. "It seems Daoist Master Cui isn't happy to see me."

Cui Buqu was sitting on the bed with an armful of blankets, nothing like a host eager to welcome a wanted guest. "If I say I'm not, will you leave?"

"Of course not." Feng Xiao glanced around the room. "I heard County Magistrate Zhao sent you some interesting gifts. Mind if I take a look?"

Without interest, Cui Buqu pointed to a box in the corner. "He said he sent me some calligraphy and paintings. Go see for yourself."

Feng Xiao opened the box and found a neat stack of ten or so scrolls. Irrepressibly curious as to whether the magistrate had taken his meaning, he unfurled the first scroll.

Cui Buqu picked up the medicinal soup Qiao Xian had left for him. He hesitated, wondering for a moment whether he should pour it out under the bed. On second thought, Qiao Xian's sense of smell was no less acute than Feng Xiao's dog nose. He sighed, pinched his nose, and tipped the

bowl back, his brows so tightly knit he could have crushed mosquitoes between them.

Good medicine was bitter indeed, and no amount of sweet cakes could suppress the aftertaste. Cui Buqu took several deep breaths. When the awful taste finally faded and he looked back up, he was greeted by the sight of Feng Xiao's peculiar smile.

"What did he send?" Cui Buqu asked suspiciously.

Feng Xiao turned the painting toward him. An erotic depiction of lovers in the throes of passion filled his vision with its vivid colors. Men and women in every sort of pose and position were strewn both inside and outside the painted buildings. It was decidedly bolder than most popular erotic paintings, explicit enough to turn even the staidest man crimson.

Cui Buqu merely rolled his eyes. Far from turning crimson, there wasn't a hint of pink in his cheeks.

Though Cui Buqu boasted incredible authority and a decisive character, he spent most of his time ill. Feng Xiao had been sure he must be comparatively innocent. Even if he wasn't shy or embarrassed, Cui Buqu should at least be a bit shocked. Yet Feng Xiao had gotten none of his expected entertainment. On Daoist Master Cui's face was a look of complete apathy, as if to say, *That's it?*

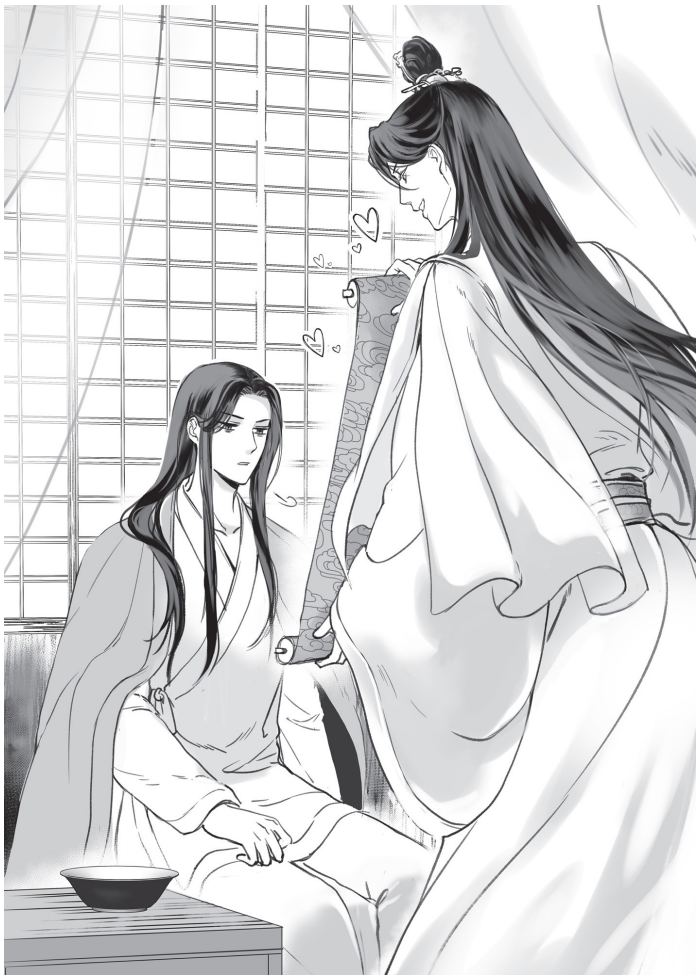
Feng Xiao felt this was no fun at all. "Are you a man or not?"

"I am if you are," drawled Cui Buqu.

"So if I'm not, you aren't?"

Cui Buqu didn't deign to respond. Only a moment's thought was required to deduce that this man was the culprit behind the magistrate's gift of such bawdy pictures. "Can't the great and mighty deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau, leader of the Fajing Sect, do his work properly for a change?"

Feng Xiao's fluttering fan came to a stop.



The Fajing Sect was known in the jianghu as one of the three demonic sects. In the past, they'd been immensely powerful. Rumor had it that anyone who saw them had to make way for them, and that people dared not speak lest a stray word offend them. The former sect leader, Guang Lingsan, had been one of the top ten martial artists in the land.

Few martial arts masters in the jianghu used the qin as a weapon. The Zuoyue Bureau was capable and well-informed; Feng Xiao wasn't the least bit surprised that Cui Buqu had figured this out. In fact, he'd never intended to hide who he was in the first place. His identity as leader of the Fajing Sect didn't conflict with his position as an official nor affect their investigations, and thus Cui Buqu had never brought it up before—he only did so now because he was thoroughly fed up with Feng Xiao's asinine behavior.

Perhaps the more outstanding a martial artist's skills, the more fatuous they became.

Feng Xiao was unruffled. "Since you brought up my background, I must now remind you of my new weapon. Don't forget you promised me Yuyin. Once we arrive in the capital, you're not allowed to spend weeks stalling."

"His Majesty will hold a banquet to welcome the new khagan to the city. The things we saw on our journey, the process of forming the alliance… The emperor is sure to inquire about everything. All that will certainly take weeks. However—" Despite his annoyance, Cui Buqu recalled that Feng Xiao had repeatedly saved his life. He adjusted his flippant tone to something more appropriate. "I just received news that Ning Shewo, the chief helmsman of the Nine Guilds of Water Transport, set out north in secret a few days ago. He's likely just arrived in Huai Province."

Of the nine guilds, the Jinhuan Guild was the most powerful, monopolizing transportation along canals in the south. Their leader, Ning Shewo, was a famous name. During Linlang Pavilion's auction in Liugong City, his adopted son Leng Du had purchased a famous bronze wine vessel.

Feng Xiao was surprised. "Wasn't he set to retire next year? Is he going sightseeing with his wives in advance?"

“That’s the strange part,” said Cui Buqu. “He concealed his identity for this trip and brought only a few trusted subordinates. Outsiders have been told he’s too ill to leave the house. Most believe he’s still at home in Jiangnan.”

After a moment’s consideration, Feng Xiao understood. “You suspect Ning Shewo is involved with the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai?”

“Feng Xiaolian, Duan Qihu, and Yuxiu—from these alone, it’s clear the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai don’t limit themselves to the north or the south. Setting aside the vacant tenth seat, we currently know the identities of directors eleven through thirteen. Moving up the ranks, the strength and status of the members must only increase, not decrease.”

“In this, we agree completely. So you speculate that Ning Shewo went north to attend the gathering on the seventh day of the seventh month—the day of the Qixi Festival.”

“That’s right,” said Cui Buqu. “The other members must have received the same letter we found on Duan Qihu. After we finish our business in the capital, we’ll go to Boling and get Yuyin, then head to the meeting. Perhaps we’ll be able to annihilate the entire Thirteen Floors in a single blow.”

Feng Xiao clapped. “Well said! I concur! Coincidentally, I too have some relevant information.”

Cui Buqu waited, but Feng Xiao did not continue. Eventually he had no choice but to ask, “What information?”

“Not telling.”

Cui Buqu glared at Feng Xiao, who didn’t look remotely guilty.

“In exchange for your information, I won’t make a fuss about you delaying our trip to Boling. But you have nothing to offer in exchange for my information. Am I right?” Feng Xiao stood and patted Cui Buqu’s shoulder. “Daoist Master Cui’s Zuoyue Bureau is so capable, and their lord chief so intelligent, that they even managed to unearth my background. Surely there’s no secret I can keep from you. Take your time thinking. I’ll see myself out.”

He didn’t wait for Cui Buqu’s reply but simply left, humming a tune.

Cui Buqu had a bad habit: If he found a loose thread in his clothing, he was compelled to pull it out even if it damaged the material. He was a terribly curious person. Since Feng Xiao had left him in suspense, he absolutely had to get to the bottom of it.

He summoned Qiao Xian and ordered her to continue their investigations. Only then did the hard-working Chief Cui finally lie down and obediently close his eyes.

One laughing Feng Xiao head. Two laughing Feng Xiao heads. Three…

Cui Buqu opened his eyes and stared blankly up at the muslin canopy overhead. This was insomnia.

At that moment, he could cheerfully have wrenched Feng Xiao’s insufferable head right off his shoulders.

# Chapter 88

THE FIFTH DAY of the fifth month was the Dragon Boat Festival.

They had arrived in Daxing City, the new capital of the Sui dynasty established earlier that year. The roads were new, and the smell of freshly cut wood and stone still hung about many of the houses. Even the common folk moving into the city had a different air about them, as if they knew they were part of the shining dawn of a new and flourishing dynasty.

Looking out over the city from the Guanyin Terrace or the various towers of the city, one would find that the style and scale of Daxing—itself the result of expanding the city of Chang'an—was markedly different from the capitals of previous dynasties. Not only was it larger, but the palace walls were grander and the streets and markets arranged along crisp lines, the whole so crammed full of people that the city resembled the star-studded heavens. Poets of the future would describe the scene thusly: "the hundred households like a game of weiqi, the dozen streets as straight as a farmer's rows. In the distance, the officials' torches flicker; a constellation of flames above the palace gates."[2]

Sunset yielded to twilight, and the bustle of the city didn't slow. Some rushed home for dinner, while others changed into light clothes, carrying colorful silk pouches and holding evil-dispelling mugwort and calamus in hand, to view the city from the river boat cruises. Horse-drawn carriages rattled along the main thoroughfares, their perfumed curtains fluttering in the wind to reveal lavish clothing, high buns, and jade hairpins. Every carriage was heading southeast.

To the southeast lay the Qu Canal. It had been completed around the same time as the city and was designed to evoke an image of wind-ruffled lotuses dancing in the breeze. Water flowed into the city through freshly dug canals, while countless lotus blossoms dotted the pond around the garden's floating pavilion and wrapped the garden in their fragrance. Supposedly the emperor believed the *Qu* in Qu Canal, with its meaning of *crooked*, was inauspicious, so the Left Vice Director, Gao Jiong, had suggested he name the place Furong Garden instead, as a nod to the lotuses.

The emperor gladly agreed, and the garden became an important landmark within the capital. Even the common folk of the city, who weren't permitted to enter the garden, could hike nearby and glimpse its scenery.

Today, however, these nobles weren't heading to Furong Garden. Their carriages converged on the nearby Qingli Garden, which sat snugly beside the banks of Qu River. There, County Duchess Yuwen, the beloved daughter of the emperor's eldest child, Princess Leping, was holding a birthday banquet, to which guests from all over had been invited.

Princess Leping's story was well known. She'd been empress and then empress dowager of the previous dynasty, then been demoted to princess when her father Yang Jian usurped the throne. What she'd gone through was nothing short of incredible. Unfortunately these momentous events had left Yuwen Eying, the daughter Princess Leping shared with the former emperor Yuwen Yun, in a rather awkward position.

Yuwen Eying was Yang Jian's granddaughter by blood, but he had also been the one to overthrow her father's Zhou dynasty. Whenever he saw her, he felt that he'd done the Yuwen Clan a great wrong, and so he remained distant from this granddaughter. Yet out of deference to Princess Leping, the emperor and empress never mistreated Yuwen Eying. Gifts flowed unceasingly from the palace, and though she didn't hold the official title of county duchess, she had all the authority of one, and thus everyone called her Duchess Yuwen.

The banquet today celebrated her fourteenth birthday, which happened to coincide with her move to the new capital. Princess Leping had chosen Qingli Garden as the venue for a grand celebration. Gifts from the ruling couple were already rolling in, while young nobles and children of the aristocracy streamed through the gates to attend the festivities, their carriages so numerous they encircled Qingli Garden like a tightly packed wall.

Two young women alighted from their carriage amid the bustling traffic at the gates. It could only be busier within. When they followed the servants inside, they saw that the pathways, trees, and rockeries had all been adorned with lanterns in the shape of lotuses. From a distance, it looked as though a thousand lanterns were suspended in the sky. Though the light of day had yet to completely fade, it already made for an awe-inspiring sight.

The two young ladies were Gao Ying, daughter of Left Vice Director Gao Jiong, and Yan Yun, whose father was also a high-ranking official of the court. They were used to fine things, but the scene that greeted them was enough to stun them. Their steps slowed.

“How many lanterns did it take to create such a magnificent sea of lights?” marveled Yan Yun.

The servant guiding them smiled. “Our lady ordered us to prepare a total of nine hundred eighty-nine lanterns to be hung all over the garden. She proclaimed she would throw a banquet with a thousand lanterns to ensure her guests enjoy themselves so greatly they forget to go home.”

“Oh?” said Gao Ying in surprise. “I heard the sound of a pipa when we first entered. Now we’re in the center of the garden, yet I can hear the pipa as clearly as before. How does the sound of the music travel so far?”

A note of pride crept into the servant’s voice. “The musicians practiced for this especially. There are musicians all throughout the garden; they will play until the banquet ends. When they finish one song, they silently count the beats before starting the next one. That way, they can play in sync no matter how far they are from each other, and the guests can hear music wherever they go.”

Gao Ying was stunned. “How long did it take them to practice for such a grand arrangement?”

The servant merely smiled.

Gao Ying and Yan Yun exchanged a glance. Both felt this was a bit too extravagant. But the banquet was in honor of the emperor’s granddaughter and princess’s daughter. It wasn’t their place to comment.

The banquet was about to begin, and most guests had taken their seats. It was to be a casual evening affair filled with song and dance, with men and women seated together. Compared to state celebrations or official banquets that took place at the palace, protocol had been set aside here. Young men and women all loved entertainment, and the event was a good opportunity to make new friends.

Glancing around, Gao Ying and Yan Yun caught sight of the Prince of Jin, who had already taken his seat. Despite his princely title, he was only a few years older than his niece, Yuwen Eying. At the moment, he was sitting

with his legs crossed, chatting away without any hauteur. But what truly caught their attention was the man he was talking to.

The guest across from him was dressed in black, his hair pulled back in a high knot. His face was breathtakingly handsome, and his gracefully curved eyes sparkled in the twilight, gleaming with the promise of a smile.

*A beauty so resplendent it could fell jade mountains, a face so radiant it was as if he held the sun and moon in his arms.*[3] Yan Yun had always thought such descriptions mere hyperbole; only now had she seen for herself that such outstanding men really did exist. The Prince of Jin was young, handsome, and talented, but beside this other man, all his splendor drained away.

"Who is that?" Yan Yun stared vacantly at the man, only returning to her senses when Gao Ying tugged at her sleeve.

"Have you heard of the Jiejian Bureau?" Gao Ying whispered. "That man is their deputy chief, Feng Xiao."

Yan Yun gasped, then lowered her voice to match Gao Ying's. "So that's him!"

Residents of the capital were more sophisticated than the common folk of the countryside; even these young women had heard of the Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus. However, these two organizations reported directly to the emperor and empress, their doings inscrutable; it was difficult for strangers to approach their members.

Feng Xiao didn't isolate himself the way Cui Buqu did and wasn't so rare a sight at the banquets of the nobility. But Yan Yun's family had only recently returned to the capital. She'd never seen Feng Xiao before.

Gao Ying smiled. "Feng-langjun is extraordinarily handsome. I'm not surprised he snared you like that. The first time I saw him, I didn't fare much better myself. He's unmarried, but someone's already set her sights on him. They say Princess Lanling loves Feng-langjun fiercely and has asked the emperor to betroth her to him."

Yan Yun was a young lady who yearned for romance. She'd been clinging to a spark of hope, but the moment she heard *Princess Lanling*, it fizzled. "Truly?"

“That’s just what I heard…”

As the young ladies whispered in each other’s ears, the Prince of Jin and Feng Xiao were discussing something else entirely.

The Prince of Jin was no maiden living in ladies’ chambers; he wasn’t at all jealous that Feng Xiao was more handsome than him. On the contrary, he was very courteous toward this confidant of the emperor.

“Not only did you take back Qiemo using only your wits, you also won over the Western Khaganate and returned with their new khagan. These are grand achievements. His Majesty is overjoyed; he intends to bestow an even greater title and fiefdom upon both of you. I’m certain the decree will come down any minute—allow me to congratulate Marquis Feng in advance.”

“The Prince of Jin is too kind,” replied Feng Xiao. “I should also tell you that we met a monk named Yuxiu in Liugong City. Later, we discovered…”

Feng Xiao spoke in hushed tones, slowly explaining Yuxiu’s background, as well as how he’d disguised himself and deceived everyone in order to sow chaos in the Western Khaganate.

Half a month had passed since their party had returned to the capital. After welcoming the khagan with a gracious reception, the emperor had provided him with a new escort home while Feng Xiao remained in the capital. He and Cui Buqu had already told the emperor everything about Yuxiu. There was no real need for Feng Xiao to repeat it all for the Prince of Jin, but Feng Xiao made a point of telling him some of the details anyway. The Prince of Jin listened attentively, without any sign of irritation or anger toward the messenger.

“I only knew that Yuxiu came from a prestigious sect and was a Buddhist master,” he said apologetically. “He had a brilliant mind, so I took him as my advisor. I never dreamed he could be connected to an organization like the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. Ah! I’ve already confessed my wrongdoings in this matter to my parents. It’s all thanks to you and Marquis Cui that we were saved from this crisis. If not for you, I daren’t imagine what catastrophe Yuxiu might have caused!”

He seemed perfectly sincere, with no hint that he held a grudge. Feng Xiao had hoped to test whether the prince had known the truth about Yuxiu from the start, but he saw now that it was fruitless. Whether the Prince of Jin had truly been ignorant of Yuxiu's intentions or merely kept the knowledge to himself, he'd clearly washed his hands of the matter.

Feng Xiao waved his fan and said breezily, "The Prince of Jin is a generous man. I confess I greatly admire His Highness."

The Prince of Jin smiled. "Marquis Feng is so understanding; I feel much more at ease. In truth, you shouldn't be sitting here talking to me. Someone else has been yearning for your company."

Feng Xiao affected surprise. "Duchess Yuwen? I've only met her ladyship once. We've never spoken before."

Seeing him act so oblivious, the Prince of Jin pointed at him and laughed. "His Majesty wishes the two of you to marry. Wu-jiejie is only too willing, but unfortunately, it seems you are not. Ah, but never mind. This is a matter between the two of you; I shouldn't interfere."

The corners of Feng Xiao's lips crooked up. He'd just opened his mouth to say more when his eye snagged on a new guest, and he changed the topic entirely, his tone gone light and teasing. "Today truly is a gathering of talents. Even a reclusive friend of mine has shown up!"

Nearby, Gao Ying and Yan Yun watched as another man was led in by a servant. It was the start of summer, and everyone was attired in light fabrics. Yet this man wore a high-collared cloak, as if it was a cold autumn day. Among all the glorious officials of the capital, he alone was different.

# Chapter 89

CUI BUQU SELDOM attended banquets, regardless of whether the host was a noble or a court official. Even at state banquets that the whole court attended, it was rare to catch a glimpse of him.

Compared to the ostentatious Feng Xiao, he was like the shadow of a tree cast by a lamp. When he wasn't needed, he could conceal his presence entirely; no one would notice he existed. Thus, it wasn't just Yan Yun who failed to recognize him; even the well-connected Gao Ying had never encountered him.

He possessed neither Feng Xiao's radiantly handsome face, nor the otherworldly air of an immortal. On the contrary, his complexion was wan, his eyes dull. Yet it wasn't about appearance. He still drew the eyes of the two young ladies and many other gazes as well.

Cui Buqu ignored them all. His cloak fluttered in the breeze as he walked toward the banquet tables, and Yan Yun picked up the faint scent of herbs. She screwed up her courage and spoke. "Sir, there are still some open seats over here—"

Before she could finish, the Prince of Jin was on his feet, inviting him over.

Many people were intrigued by Cui Buqu, but most had no idea who he was. They watched as the normally proud and pampered Prince of Jin politely cupped his hands to him. The two appeared to be on familiar terms, further igniting the curiosity of the bystanders.

Yan Yun whispered to Gao Ying, "Who is he?"

Gao Ying shook her head. "I've never seen him before either," she said, hesitant. "Perhaps some member of the royal family?"

"He's the Zuoyue Bureau chief, and his name is Cui Buqu," came a voice from nearby.

The two young ladies turned, then quickly got to their feet to bow. "Greetings to Duchess Yuwen!"

Yuwen Eying was only fourteen years old, in the springtime bloom of her youth. Despite her complicated background, she'd grown up sheltered by her mother's love and protection. To her, the grudges of ruined families and usurped thrones were a distant thing. Her childhood had been as happy as that of any princess of the realm, and her face was free of cynicism or guile. It was precisely for this reason that she was no threat to the Yang Clan's Great Sui, and why the emperor was willing to indulge his daughter's wishes and shower his granddaughter with gifts.

"Please rise." Yuwen Eying was familiar with Gao Ying, and reached out to help her upright. She smiled at the two girls. "I was talking to Fang-niang and the others just now. Why didn't you go say hello? They said they couldn't find you anywhere—now I see you were here peeping at handsome gentlemen!"

Gao Ying laughed. "How can you say we're peeping? We came over to wish the duchess many happy returns on her birthday. Naturally, we must make use of our chance to stare openly!"

Yuwen Eying blinked. "Well then, who are you interested in? Don't say Feng Xiao; my fifth aunt already has her eye on him, so I can't help you there. If you're referring to my second uncle beside him…he already has a princess. Becoming a concubine is out of the question for young ladies of your station. But other than that, perhaps I can help."

Her words were so direct, even Gao Ying found them a little overbold. "No, no!" she hastened to say. "Please—stop guessing. Everyone appreciates a lovely sight; we were only having a look. There are many other stars besides Feng-langjun. Maybe I'll find a man like the legendary Pan An: a gentleman so handsome, maidens will fight each other to throw fruit into his carriage!"

"Dare I ask the duchess about the gentleman talking with the Prince of Jin?" Yan Yun whispered.

Yuwen Eying glanced over. "Oh," she said. "That's Marquis Cui."

Yan Yun waited for her to continue. But though Yuwen Eying had been prattling on just a moment ago, she seemed to have surprisingly little to say now.

The three of them looked at each other.

“Marquis Cui?” asked Gao Ying. “The envoy who escorted the Göktürk khagan to court recently?”

“That’s right,” said Yuwen Eying. “That achievement made him a marquis. He’s also the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, with a rank equal to the Six Ministers.”

Yan Yun couldn’t help sneaking another glance at Cui Buqu, standing not far away. From here, she had a good view of his profile. The thousand lotus lanterns glowed behind him, limning his figure and tracing its gentle contours with light. Yet looking at his back, so straight and tall, she was struck by a sense of bleak coldness. This man held such a high position at such a young age, and judging from his appearance, it seemed his health was poor as well.

Yan Yun chanted his name over and over in her heart, silently memorizing the characters. *Cui Buqu.*

Cui Buqu paid no mind to the many eyes on him, nor to whether those gazes were kind or malicious. After exchanging a few words with the Prince of Jin, he covered his mouth and coughed quietly.

“The wind here is strong. Let us sit while we speak!” The Prince of Jin invited them to sit and raised his wine in a toast. “Deputy Chief Feng also happens to be here today; a rare treat. I shall take full advantage of my eldest sister’s hospitality and offer you a toast with her wine. My hearty thanks to both of you for exposing Yuxiu’s true face. If not for you, I would have unwittingly harbored a viper and wrought great disaster.” He remembered to add: “Cui-xiansheng isn’t feeling well; you shouldn’t be drinking. I’ll drink this toast on behalf of both of us.”

He drank his wine in one draft. Cui Buqu raised his cup and let his lips brush the rim before setting it down without drinking. “Your Highness is too kind.”

The Prince of Jin smiled. “I asked my father for permission to hold a banquet in Furong Garden ten days from now. Perhaps the two gentlemen will have time to attend?”

The five princes present at this birthday banquet were all sons of the empress. It was well known that her favorite was not the eldest nor the youngest, but her second son, the Prince of Jin. His life had been smooth

sailing since birth; he'd never encountered any difficulties or setbacks. From his parents above him to his subjects below him, very few had ever denied him anything.

Of course, he also very rarely took the initiative to extend such an earnest invitation.

Another man might have agreed right away, but Cui Buqu merely said calmly, "I'm deeply grateful for Your Highness's generosity, but I fear my duties keep me too busy to attend."

The servants behind the Prince of Jin were practically sweating, but the prince's expression didn't so much as flicker. He nodded. "I understand that you're a busy man. It's pillars like you who uphold the stability of this nation."

"Erlang!" A short distance away, Princess Leping and a group of noblewomen had arrived. They waved a greeting to the Prince of Jin.

The prince rose to his feet. "Please, carry on chatting. I won't disturb you further."

He cupped his hands toward Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu, then turned and made for Princess Leping. Before he reached her, another man appeared and bowed to him. Recognizing the man as a petty official he'd previously met during morning court, the prince nodded acknowledgment.

The man gave him a solicitous smile. "I've heard Your Highness is soon to host a banquet at Furong Garden. I have some small talent when it comes to poetry; dare I ask Your Highness for an invitation?"

"We'll see," said the Prince of Jin indifferently, and walked away without even glancing at the man.

Observing this exchange, Feng Xiao turned to Cui Buqu. "What kind of magic potion did you slip the Prince of Jin? Why does he act so differently toward you?"

"Different how?" Unconcerned, Cui Buqu picked a mandarin up off the table and slowly began to peel it.

Feng Xiao pointed his fan at the disappointed petty official. "See that? That's how the Prince of Jin normally conducts himself. He was polite

to me, but it was different with you—he was wary, as if afraid of making you even a little unhappy.”

“So?”

“So, is the Prince of Jin carrying a torch for you? Are his affections unrequited?”

Cui Buqu snorted a laugh. “Only half a month since our last meeting and Deputy Chief Feng’s brain has been replaced with straw.”

Feng Xiao chuckled in return. “It’s fine if you don’t want to talk about it. Now that you mention it, I’d like to know why you’ve been avoiding me for the past few weeks.”

Cui Buqu didn’t bat an eye. “When have I avoided you?”

Feng Xiao began counting off on his fingers. “After our meeting with the emperor, every time I sent someone to the Zuoyue Bureau, they were told you were either sick in bed or out of town. When I went to call upon you personally, you hid away and refused to see me. Why? You’re a callous man, Daoist Master Cui. We were husband and wife; we shared every intimacy. Yet you wish to burn the bridge between us?”

Cui Buqu sneered. “Is that why you’ve been harassing the Zuoyue Bureau? Three days ago, you complained our tea was too bitter and salty, then called our refreshments inedible and our maids ugly. The day before yesterday, you smashed a vase in our front hall then released several stray cats inside to wreak havoc. Yesterday you fought with Zhangsun. When tomorrow comes, are you going to send thugs to our door to demand compensation for some made-up wrong?”

Feng Xiao snapped his fan shut. “An excellent idea! How about something like, ‘Cui Buqu is an ungrateful, heartless bastard, and the pregnant wife he abandoned has arrived in the capital in search of him’?”

# Chapter 90

FENG XIAO WAS certainly an excellent collaborator, but he was also a potential threat. Cui Buqu could never relax around him.

They'd traversed fire and flood together, but only because they'd had a common goal and shared in each other's successes and failures. Now that they'd returned to the capital, with all the threats behind them, they'd reverted to their previous dynamic.

The emperor and empress were a loving couple, but even they competed with each other. Likewise, the scope of the two bureaus' duties and interests were so strongly interconnected that an amicable relationship between them was impossible. Just as Feng Xiao often tried unsuccessfully to figure out what made Cui Buqu tick, Cui Buqu found it hard to guess what Feng Xiao was thinking.

Sometimes they acted like enemies, sometimes friends, and sometimes neither. Time and time again they went up to the line, only to take a step further when they found the other person could tolerate a little more. This was especially true of Feng Xiao, who found the whole thing greatly entertaining and never tired of probing his opponent.

The location of the Zuoyue Bureau was a secret known to very few. If Feng Xiao really did call a group of thugs there to make a scene, it really would be quite the headache.

Feng Xiao flicked his fan open and smiled. Seeing Cui Buqu's look of vexation, he leaned in and whispered, "You never attend these banquets. You wouldn't even accept the Prince of Jin's invitation, and there's even less reason for you to attend Duchess Yuwen's birthday celebration. Be honest: Why are you here? What evil schemes are you concocting in that brain of yours?"

Cui Buqu sneered. "No matter how many evil schemes I concoct, they're all useless when it comes to you; your skin is thicker than the Great Wall!"

Grabbing Cui Buqu's shoulder, Feng Xiao held him tightly in place and ignored his struggles. He wore a warm, friendly expression as he said, "See here. Together, you and I braved sandstorms at the border and stayed at a haunted inn, our lives bound together as we crawled out of the jaws of death. Try to downplay it if you like, but we were fast friends who were ready to give our lives for each other out there. Yet now you're hiding something so insignificant from me? How could you?"

Cui Buqu felt like there was a fly buzzing incessantly in his ear. He glared at Feng Xiao. The man was gorgeous; his sole imperfection was his ability to speak. If only Cui Buqu could sew his mouth shut, he thought, then he'd be able to appreciate his face in peace, and everything would be perfect.

"I came to arrest someone." Cui Buqu had finally revealed a shred of information, but his expression remained bland. He sat cross-legged with his elbow propped on the table, leaning slightly to one side. Half of him was bathed in the light of the lanterns, the other half lost in the dappled shadows of a tree. The cloak of night softened his silhouette, imparting to him a certain gentleness—but the moment these words left his mouth, that softness morphed into sharp bloodlust.

Feng Xiao hadn't been privy to Yan Yun and Gao Ying's thoughts earlier, but now his thoughts followed a similar path. It wasn't about this man's appearance, but his aura.

"To arrest whom?"

Cui Buqu slanted him a glance. "The Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus each have their own separate purview. We are like a well and a river, our waters never mingling. Deputy Chief Feng oughtn't pry."

Feng Xiao clicked his tongue. "When I'm useful, you cling and coo at me. When I'm not, you turn a cold shoulder. What a heartless, ungrateful man! I fear all young maidens must flee from you on sight!"

By this time, Yan Yun had mustered her courage and approached, tugging Gao Ying along with her. She arrived just in time to overhear Feng Xiao's words and froze.

Gao Ying coughed softly. "Good evening, sirs."

Cui Buqu nodded.

Feng Xiao arched a brow but said nothing. He'd seen plenty of women try to throw themselves into his arms. Wherever he went, young ladies flocked to him. If not for his exceptional qinggong allowing him to outrun them, the story of Pan An's admirers throwing fruit at the object of their affection might have indeed repeated itself in this dynasty.

Young maidens often came to greet him during banquets and other social functions. It had been novel the first few times, but when it'd happened again and again, he'd grown numb to it. He waited for the girls to say the words he expected, but they remained silent. Impatient, he rapped the table with his fan. "I'm catching up with an old friend of mine. Is there something I can help you with?"

Gao Ying shoved Yan Yun forward. The maiden took two steps, her cheeks coloring prettily, and addressed Cui Buqu. "Cui-langjun, may I speak with you privately?"

Feng Xiao's brows climbed toward his hairline. He smiled. "To meet such a beautiful maiden on such a beautiful evening, of course Cui-xiong wouldn't refuse."

Faced with the girl's sparkling eyes and Feng Xiao at his side fanning the flames, Cui Buqu remained unmoved. "Not right now."

Yan Yun blinked in surprise. In three short words, Cui Buqu had ground this young maiden's eager heart to dust.

Duchess Yuwen had watched the entire scene from the sidelines. Unable to bear it, she'd started toward them in hopes of putting in a good word for Yan Yun when Cui Buqu stopped her with a single glance.

His gaze was colder than the chill night wind. Yet in the next beat, he smiled and held out the peeled mandarin in his hand. "Would you like a mandarin, Your Grace?"

Duchess Yuwen took a silent step back.

Watching this, Feng Xiao found it odd. Cui Buqu was a ruthless person, but there was no need to intimidate a young lady he didn't know. And considering Yuwen Eying's status, it was unlikely they shared any connection—indeed, there was no sign of familiarity in their interaction.

But her behavior raised many questions, in the same way as the Prince of Jin's attempt to play up to Cui Buqu earlier. Feng Xiao was terribly curious. Cui Buqu was an eternal enigma. Feng Xiao had peeled away layer after layer, but always found more secrets hidden underneath.

Before he could solve this particular riddle, Princess Lanling's personal maid arrived on the scene, casting about as if looking for someone. When she caught sight of Feng Xiao, her eyes lit up and she ran over. "Feng-langjun, my lady the princess invites you over!"

Feng Xiao smiled. "Apologies, I'm catching up with a good friend of mine. I'm afraid I can't tear myself away."

The exalted Princess Lanling, daughter of the emperor himself and lovelier than an orchid, couldn't even move a single man. Had the winds in the capital truly changed so much in a few short years? Had refined gentlemen fallen out of fashion in favor of cold men with hearts of iron? Yan Yun forgot her own disappointment and gaped at Feng Xiao.

Had any other man been so disrespectful, the maid would have flown into a rage. But Feng Xiao was right in front of her, so she could only reveal some mild indignation. "Feng-langjun, my princess is in poor health today. Can you not go see her just once?"

"Please convey to your princess on my behalf…" Feng Xiao considered what to say. "That she should drink plenty of hot water and take the utmost care with her health."

The maid was speechless. She glared at Feng Xiao with loathing, then turned on her heel and hurried off.

Duchess Yuwen couldn't hold her tongue. "Deputy Chief Feng, though my fifth aunt is the emperor's daughter, she is not at all arrogant. She's a kind and gentle soul, and so lovely even flowers would blush in shame. Your lordship is an official; marrying a princess would be a great honor!"

Feng Xiao saw little point in arguing with a half-grown girl. He looked at Cui Buqu's freshly peeled mandarin on the table, then split it in two and popped half into his mouth.

Cui Buqu frowned and took back the remaining half to offer it again to Duchess Yuwen. "Are you sure you wouldn't like some mandarins, Your

Grace? They're very sweet."

Duchess Yuwen looked at the mandarin half in Cui Buqu's hand and forced a smile. "I'm fine."

She too turned and left.

Gao Ying and Yan Yun looked at each other awkwardly. They hastily said their farewells and drifted away.

"Well now, there's another one," said Feng Xiao. "You can explain away the Prince of Jin flattering you as him trying to recruit talented men or hoping to use the Zuoyue Bureau for his own purposes. But what about Duchess Yuwen? I'd say she was about three parts caution, three parts displeasure, and four parts fear. Why?"

"Guess," said Cui Buqu.

Feng Xiao smiled. "All right. Are you Princess Leping's lover?"

The words *Are you an idiot?* were practically written on Cui Buqu's face. "If I were Princess Leping's lover, why would I go to such trouble dealing with Linlang Pavilion rather than just speaking to her?"

Feng Xiao shut his fan with a snap, tapping it against his palm. "That's true. So you must be Empress Dugu's lover instead?"

"Why not just accuse me of having an affair with the emperor," snapped Cui Buqu.

"Impossible." Feng Xiao's expression was perfectly serious. "If the emperor preferred men, there would be plenty of rumors flying about."

Cui Buqu split the remaining mandarin half into segments and placed them on the table to toy with. "Perhaps," he said, calm in the face of Feng Xiao's brazen nonsense. "Maybe I'm the emperor's illegitimate child, left out in the cold."

"Knowing what the empress is like? She'd have sent you to reincarnate long before you grew up!"

During their absurd back and forth, the rest of the guests had arrived in the garden, and it was now tightly packed. Princess Leping accompanied the crown prince, the Prince of Jin, the Prince of Qin, as well as Princess Lanling and the rest of her siblings as she took a seat.

To celebrate their niece’s birthday, every one of her aunts and uncles —all children of the ruling couple—were in attendance. Their presence was an extraordinary honor. Princess Leping, the eldest princess, had personally invited them for her daughter’s sake; the girl was the apple of her eye, her beloved treasure. Despite Duchess Yuwen’s complicated circumstances, Princess Leping was like any other mother and did all she could to uphold her daughter’s dignity.

It was rare for young men and women to gather together en masse, and many noble families were taking advantage of the occasion to look for a potential match for their children. All the young people sat together, chatting happily as they shared toasts and discussed common interests.

The music of the pipa drifted through the air, but the dancers didn’t stay in one spot. Bold and unrestrained, they danced from one end of the garden to the other, trailing ribbons. They were as graceful as celestial maidens, adding another radiant touch to the bustling hall. Princess Leping really had spared no expense for her daughter’s birthday. Anyone else would be hard-pressed to throw a grander fete than tonight’s thousand-lantern banquet.

Quite a few guests who wished to take this chance to make a name for themselves before the crown prince and other royalty suggested a game of riddles. Duchess Yuwen also joined the game: She pulled a jade hairpin from her hair, and declared that if a woman took first place, she’d gift it to her. If a man won, he’d receive a particular sword from her family’s treasury.

The crown prince smiled. “In that case, allow me to ask the first riddle.”

A sportive atmosphere overtook the guests, and they rubbed their hands together, ready to meet the challenge.

Unfortunately, before they could begin, someone tactlessly interrupted. “Dare I ask the duchess, is the sword you intend to gift a certain item from the palace of the previous dynasty? If it’s the sword I’m guessing, Emperor Xuan once carried it. Upon establishing the new dynasty, His Majesty ordered his men to catalog all the treasures in the palace; not a single one was to be missed. I too was present then and looked at the list, but there was no record of this sword. It was presumed to have

gone missing. How is it that our records from the previous dynasty don't list it, yet now it is available for Duchess Yuwen to offer up? Can Her Grace explain?"

Cui Buqu's tone was bland, and he hadn't moved from his seat. Yet the sight of him elicited great loathing in the watchers—most especially Duchess Yuwen and her mother, whose faces turned pitch-black.

All was silent. In just a few words, Cui Buqu had struck a nerve with Princess Leping, publicly dredging up a past she'd prefer never to examine again. She'd been raised to be loyal to her nation, yet she'd been forced to become a traitor—and in a terrible piece of irony, the usurper was her own father.

No one dared speak.

The guests looked at each other. No doubt Cui Buqu had gone mad. If not that, then he must have some deep grudge against Princess Leping. Why else would he say such a thing but to ruin her banquet?

"What are you suggesting?!" Princess Leping's voice was tight with rage. "That I steal swords and hide them? This sword had been lost at the time of the cataloging. Someone discovered it later and gave it to me! Is there some crime in this?"

“Of course there’s no crime,” said Cui Buqu. “Who gave it to you? May I ask Her Highness to tell us?”

“Cui Buqu, just because you’re chief of the Zuoyue Bureau and Mother shows you a little favor, do not imagine that I’m afraid of you. I will tell the emperor about this sword myself at a later time. Tonight, I won’t allow anyone to spoil the evening. Guards, take him away!”

Princess Leping had heard about the scene Cui Buqu had made at Linlang Pavilion in Liugong City. She hated him for humiliating her, yet had no choice but to mark down the grudge and bide her time. Yet now Cui Buqu dared to openly make trouble at her banquet. It was unacceptable.

The crown prince shared her fury. “Marquis Cui, you returned from your mission a meritorious servant of our nation, but that doesn’t mean you can say whatever you wish. The princess’s banquet is a joyful occasion for everyone here tonight; only you have shown such disrespect. I’d advise you to choose your next words wisely!”

“Brother.” The Prince of Jin coughed lightly. “Perhaps Marquis Cui has some reasons we’re unaware of. Why not see what he has to say?”

But Cui Buqu shook his head. “I have no larger reasons; I was simply curious is all. I apologize for spoiling the princess’s mood.”

Everyone was dumbfounded. *So you really just wanted to make trouble?*

Cui Buqu remained where he was. The servants didn’t dare grab him, while Princess Leping was about to collapse from sheer rage at his shamelessness.

“Since it was just a misunderstanding, let us continue the feast,” said the Prince of Jin, attempting to smooth things over. He smiled. “Come, let us have a toast. What a lovely young lady my niece has become; in the blink of an eye, she’s grown so tall. I wonder who her lucky suitor will be!”

Abashed, Duchess Yuwen quickly paid her uncle her respects, and the atmosphere soon became lively again. Princess Leping longed to punish Cui Buqu, but she didn’t wish to sour the mood again. She forced herself to calm, vowing to take care of him once the banquet was over.

The game of riddles started anew. Several young men who admired the duchess had been quietly displeased at Cui Buqu's behavior and were raring to avenge her. Only Feng Xiao saw Cui Buqu arranging the mandarin segments on the table into a single word—*Kill*.

So he really hadn't come simply to attend the banquet, but to ruin it.

It was just as Feng Xiao had thought. This Cui fellow was more bashful than a wealthy family's maiden daughter, cloistered at home day in and day out. Why would he ever want to attend a duchess's banquet?

Feng Xiao moved his fan with ease, settling down to watch the show. His mood had greatly improved. Surely it wouldn't be fair if he was the only one getting set up. Such a gracious gift must be shared with others, no?

# Chapter 91

THE DISTURBANCE had temporarily subsided. No one looked at Cui Buqu, striving to rekindle the festive atmosphere. Even those who'd wanted to pay their respects to Feng Xiao now remained where they were due to his proximity to the troublemaker.

Feng Xiao didn't notice; his full attention was on his hands as he arranged something on the table.

After much good-natured urging, the crown prince smiled and told the first riddle: "What has a pair of twos inside it, four legs and eight heads, but also five eights within? The water flows upward, like a spring."[4]

The hall was filled with the brilliant and learned. Very quickly, a number of guests guessed the character for *well*. The young scholar who'd answered first flushed with pleasure.

Yuwen Eying had said that if a woman guessed correctly, she would give her the jade hairpin, while a man would receive the sword. But Cui Buqu's words still lingered in Princess Leping's ears; she was ill at ease. She said warmly to the scholar, "My family has another sword, wielded by the famed Sima Hui of the Three Kingdoms era. There are some who doubt the provenance of the sword, and I don't wish them to implicate you. What do you say, is this sword an acceptable gift?"

With an explanation like this, the scholar didn't dare refuse; he could only privately fume at Cui Buqu for being a meddling busybody. "I thank the princess for her generosity!" he said quickly.

Duchess Yuwen ordered someone to retrieve the sword from the treasury and present it to the scholar as the rest of the guests looked on in envy. Some present had obtained their high positions through sheer good luck; they weren't as quick-witted as the others. Knowing they couldn't rely on their own abilities to stand out in the game of riddles, many hit upon the idea of puffing themselves up by putting someone else down. The best target was, naturally, a certain man who'd offended the princess and her daughter with his rudeness only moments ago.

“I’ve heard Marquis Cui is a brilliant man,” someone exclaimed loudly, “capable of weaving a hundred intricate strategies. I know a difficult puzzle, one no one has been able to solve for years. I wonder if Marquis Cui can solve it?”

*Here it comes!* As one, everyone looked over at Cui Buqu. Most of them merely wanted in on the fun; they didn’t care what happened so long as it was entertaining.

Cui Buqu looked over. “I rarely appear in public,” he drawled. “How did you hear of my reputation?”

The instigator was no ordinary scholar, but a son of one of the capital’s most prestigious families. His name was Yang Rende, and he was the nephew of the Imperial Counselor, Yang Su. He was a longtime companion of the young Duchess Yuwen.

Yang Rende smiled. “Marquis Cui traveled to the Western Regions as an envoy. You transformed the sparks of impending war into shipments of jade and silk, exchanging hostility for friendship. Not only did you take back Qiemo, you returned with a new Göktürk khagan. Only a brilliant man could accomplish such deeds.”

He didn’t give Cui Buqu the opportunity to change the subject; before he could reply, Yang Rende produced a jade orb from his lapels. The glow of the thousand lanterns revealed countless tiny holes scattered over the surface of the jade orb. Each opening led to one on the other side, and a red string was woven throughout.

“There’s only one red thread,” explained Yang Rende. “A man of great skill threaded and wrapped the entire orb with it, making it nigh impossible to find the end. Ever since I got it, I’ve wanted to separate the orb and thread without damaging either. But no matter how I tried, I couldn’t find the string’s tail. Perhaps Marquis Cui can help?”

He handed the jade orb to a servant and waved him toward Cui Buqu. The man was intercepted on the way by the crown prince, who, being curious, also wanted a look. Soon the little jade ball had passed through everyone’s hands, but no one could find the string’s end. The crowd murmured, marveling at the puzzle.

Feng Xiao had no interest in such games among scholars. Besides, that jade orb had already been touched by too many hands; he wouldn't dream of handling it himself. He didn't so much as raise his head; instead, he continued to be wholly focused on playing with his mandarins. There was now a small heap of peeled mandarins beside him, all uneaten. For most, the thousand lanterns only cast a simple glow over their faces. But somehow, this light seemed to bathe Feng Xiao's countenance with a gentle radiance, tempting many young women to sneak peeks at him as he worked.

At last the jade orb reached Cui Buqu's hands. He took it and spun it around. "Indeed, this is a piece of incredible craftsmanship. I've never seen anything like it."

Yang Rende smiled gleefully. "Then I shall trouble Marquis Cui."

Cui Buqu shook his head. "I can't find the end either."

The young man feigned surprise. "But you saw through the imposter impersonating the Göktürk khagan. Surely you're not playing dumb on purpose to appease the crown prince and first princess?"

Princess Leping smiled. "If even someone as clever as Marquis Cui cannot solve it, I fear no one can."

Her words of praise contained an unmistakable edge of mockery. Even if everyone present jeered at Cui Buqu, it wouldn't be enough to appease her anger. Her slender fingers rubbed the handle of her fan as a new plot came to mind. She called for a maid and gave her a few low-voiced orders.

The girl nodded and turned to leave, only to come face-to-face with a strange woman in white. She was as lovely as a celestial maiden, but her expression was frigid as that of King Yama.

The maid reeled back with a frown. "Who are you? Move aside, quickly! Go!"

"No one's going anywhere tonight," said Qiao Xian coldly. Her hand flashed out and struck the maid, who cried out and fell limply to the floor, unconscious.

They were only steps away from the princess. At the maid's cry, she whirled and shouted in shock, "Who goes there?! Guards!"

Everyone looked over in time to see Qiao Xian walk over to Cui Buqu and nod.

Cui Buqu rose to his feet and straightened his clothes. “Surround the princess’s residence, inside and out,” he said calmly. “No one is to leave without my order.”

Qiao Xian cupped her hands. She waved, and several figures peeled off from the darkness, blocking off all routes of escape. These people were dressed in black robes, their faces cold and solemn. The token of the Zuoyue Bureau hung from their waists, and they held the Zuoyue Bureau’s sabers in their hands. This was the uniform of Cui Buqu’s organization.

The guests gaped in astonishment. Everyone turned to stare at Cui Buqu; they had no idea how to react.

The crown prince slammed his hands on the table and stood, furious. “Cui Buqu. Is this a revolt? Guards!”

Princess Leping was so angry her face had gone purple. She’d hoped to teach Cui Buqu a lesson, to put him in his place. Yet to think the man had gone mad, that he’d do something so astounding! Bringing men to lay siege to the princess’s residence, trapping the crown prince, the Prince of Jin and their royal relatives here in the garden—even if he claimed it wasn’t a revolt, it was as good as one.

The Prince of Jin also wanted to ask if Cui Buqu had lost his mind, but as the words reached the tip of his tongue, his sharp eyes spotted something in the darkness. In addition to the men from the Zuoyue Bureau, he saw several silhouettes that resembled Imperial Guards. He shut his mouth again and silently watched and waited.

Cui Buqu ignored the uproar and the censure. Coldly he said, “A group of miscreants sought to use this thousand-lantern banquet for their own nefarious ends. Fortunately, I caught wind of it in advance and came to stop them. These criminals have hidden lamp oil all around Qingli Garden and sealed off every path out. With almost a thousand lanterns here tonight, starting a fire is the work of seconds; a single spark would turn the garden into a sea of flames. Qiao Xian, bring it here.”

Qiao Xian ordered someone to bring over a pot with a flowering pomegranate tree. Beneath the shocked gazes of the crowd, she lifted the

pot and hurled it to the floor. The roots of the plant had been destroyed—in their place, over half the pot had been filled with oil, and a wooden board placed overtop. A thin layer of soil had been spread over the board, into which the stems had been re-inserted.

The servants of the princess's residence had worked themselves to the bone preparing for this banquet. Using a board like this was a normal trick to deceive the princess and please the duchess—after all, the banquet would last only a single night. Doing it this way would kill the plants, but they would last long enough to adorn the garden. No one cared what happened to the flowers afterward.

But this didn't explain why the flowerpot was filled with oil.

"Behind this observation deck, there used to be a small lotus pond. Yet now the water has been drained; there's only mud left. If a fire were to break out, you wouldn't even have a pond to jump into."

"I remember that," Duchess Yuwen murmured. "They said they wanted to change the lotuses to peonies because I like them, but there was no time, so they sealed off the area instead."

No one heard her. Everyone was too busy goggling at Cui Buqu.

"The terrain here is higher than the rest of the garden for a clear view of the brilliant lanterns below. The paths leading here would have been the first to catch fire. Even if you tried to jump down, risking breaking an arm or a leg, there would be no escape—there were assassins waiting for you down below. Tomorrow morning, everyone in the capital would have heard that Qingli Garden burned down, and the lives of our nation's princes and princesses were lost." He looked around and said slowly, "None of the honored guests here tonight would have been spared."

Everyone stared at him blankly, too stunned to digest his words.

"Who?" cried the crown prince. "Who would do such a thing?!"

"Does His Majesty know of this?!" asked the Prince of Jin.

Cui Buqu nodded. "As a precaution, I borrowed two hundred members of the Imperial Guard from His Majesty. We are working together now to capture the criminals, including the mastermind behind this. We've found twenty of them in total."

The Prince of Jin breathed a sigh of relief. “Marquis Cui anticipated the enemy’s movements and averted the danger. You’ve saved our lives. But who is the mastermind behind this? Such an intricate scheme could only be possible with the help of an insider.”

Cui Buqu smiled, but it was an expression devoid of warmth. Instead, it flashed with murderous intent. “Bring them here.”

Qiao Xian waved a hand. Two Zuoyue guards came forward with a young man between them and shoved him into the center of the crowd. The man was tied up and gagged. The instant Qiao Xian stepped forward and removed the cotton gag, he cried out, “Save me, princess! Please save me!”

Princess Leping paled in horror. Duchess Yuwen gasped.

“Does the princess recognize this man?” asked Cui Buqu.

Princess Leping’s face was ashen, but she remained silent.

Cui Buqu turned to Duchess Yuwen instead. “If the princess doesn’t recognize him, perhaps Your Grace does?”

“Isn’t he Ren Yue, one of the retainers in the princess’s residence?” she asked feebly.

“That’s right. This man Ren Yue comes from the Ren family, masters of the Poised Swan sword technique. This technique is famed in the jianghu. Ren Yue is an impressive young man with a promising future, well-learned and a master of both pen and sword. Just last year, Princess Leping recommended him as an official. After entering her residence as her retainer, he gained her trust and was elevated to serve her personally.”

Cui Buqu spoke these words with a deliberate emphasis; no one could mistake his meaning. Princess Leping’s expression grew uglier.

Everyone was stunned—save for Feng Xiao, who remained entirely unaffected. He finally stopped fiddling with the mandarins and examined his handiwork, brushing pith from his hands in satisfaction. On the table, the stringy white pith had been meticulously arranged into the shape of a fox with its bushy tail tucked beneath its body, its ears drooping—a cunning trickster doing its best to look like a harmless quail.

# Chapter 92

CUI BUQU WAS too busy enjoying the expression twisting Princess Leping's face to pay attention to anything else. It wasn't until Feng Xiao tugged at his sleeve that he lowered his head in confusion and caught sight of that wicked little fox.

He blinked for a moment, wavering between *This person is sick in the head* and *This person is a twelve-year-old child*, before settling decisively on the first. But Feng Xiao's interruption had derailed his train of thought; Princess Leping, having gathered some of her wits, took the opportunity to interject.

"Ren Yue plotted treason, deceiving even me. If you knew of this, why didn't you inform me earlier? Instead you allowed the plan to proceed, inciting havoc!" Seizing her chance, Princess Leping interrogated him. "The crown prince, the Prince of Jin, all my royal siblings are here. Had any of them been harmed, could you bear the responsibility?"

Cui Buqu privately cursed Feng Xiao for throwing him off as he wrenched his scattered thoughts back on track. "Why is Your Highness so upset?" he asked coldly. "First of all, we couldn't risk scaring off the enemy before the plot was exposed. We had to wait until the criminals revealed themselves as scheming foxes before catching the whole lot."

Speaking of foxes… He looked down again. The mandarin pith fox was still there, its eyes narrowed. It looked as if it were glowering at its prey just ahead, waiting for a chance to pounce. Feng Xiao's artistic talents were apparent. But it was even more apparent that he had far too much time on his hands. Was the great and mighty deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau only here to attend the banquet, with no other motive?

Rumors abounded that Princess Lanling was besotted with Feng Xiao, and it was said the emperor also wished them to marry. Feng Xiao couldn't have come here for the princess, could he? A number of theories flashed through his mind as Cui Buqu drawled, "Secondly, Ren Yue was once known by another name."

He paused and observed Princess Leping's face, but as her expression was already unsightly, he detected no change. "His original surname was Yuwen, and his given name was Yi."

The attendees at today's banquet were either royals, noble dukes and ladies, or officials of the court. They were the upper echelons of the Sui capital. Upon hearing the name Yuwen, they immediately made certain associations.

The Prince of Jin was the first to voice the question. "A survivor from the previous dynasty?"

"Correct," said Cui Buqu. "His father was Prince Yuewe, also known as Yuwen Sheng, of the previous dynasty. Yuwen Yi escaped and was adopted by the Ren family, who changed his name to Ren Yue. It was given out that he was a distant nephew with whom the family had lost touch. He kept his identity hidden and bided his time for many years, making a name for himself in the jianghu as Ren Yue. It was then that he caught the princess's eye. On this occasion, Ren Yue volunteered to organize the banquet, and the princess entrusted him with full responsibility for the event. It was easy for him to make whatever arrangements he wanted, and today's murderous plot was born."

"I am not Yuwen Yi!" shouted Ren Yue. "It's all nonsense! Have you no shame, framing me for this crime! Princess, save me!"

Princess Leping's face was pale, her lips trembling. She was unable to say a word. She wanted to reprimand Cui Buqu, but she knew he wouldn't have said all this without gathering evidence to support it. If she made any retort, she'd only humiliate herself. "I knew nothing of this. I was also in the garden; I would have died along with everyone else!" She glared hatefully at Ren Yue. "I treated you well, Ren Yue. Is this how you repay me?!"

Fear flooded Ren Yue's face. "Princess, please think!" he cried. "I'm not the criminal! I have no idea where the oil in the pots came from. Princess, I've been framed. How can you believe him over me? You said you loved me—"

Princess Leping's voice rose. "Why hasn't he been taken away?!"

All sorts of expressions colored the faces of the guests. Many pretended they hadn't heard a thing. That the princess would take a lover was no great surprise. Princess Leping had been a widow for many years and was still in her prime. It was understandable that she'd found the loneliness unbearable. But this was a private matter. Had it never been dragged out in the open, everyone would have been happy to turn a blind eye and pretend the princess was a paragon of virtue, faithful to her spouse to her grave.

Cui Buqu offered the shadow of a smile before putting a brutal end to the masquerade. "Yuwen Yi does bear a striking resemblance to the late Emperor Xuan. No wonder the princess couldn't resist him."

Princess Leping's knees buckled, and her maids rushed up to support her.

With a wave of his hand, Cui Buqu had Ren Yue and his accomplices taken away. Clad in a black cloak draped over a plain white robe, he stood in the wind, the air about him harsh and bleak. After this incident, even fewer people would be willing to approach him.

Yang Rende, the man who'd produced the jade orb in an attempt to frustrate Cui Buqu, shrank into himself. He feared Cui Buqu would remember him and seek revenge.

He was right; Cui Buqu remembered him. He pointed at Yang Rende and said, "Take this man away as well."

Yang Rende jolted to his feet, crying out, "Marquis Cui, I didn't mean any disrespect earlier. You can't use public resources to avenge your private grudges!"

Cui Buqu coughed. "Yang-gongzi, you think too highly of yourself. I'm arresting you because you were the first person Ren Yue befriended when he came to the capital. You were also the one who introduced him to the princess, allowing him to enter her residence as a retainer. I do wonder, why did you recommend him to the princess? Perhaps you saw from the start that he looked like her deceased husband?"

"I didn't!" shouted Yang Rende. "It's not like that!"

Qiao Xian tapped an acupoint, and he fell silent.

“It’s true I have no idea how to unravel the thread from the orb,” said Cui Buqu. “But as Yang-gongzi will be spending a while in prison, you’ll have plenty of time to think. Perhaps you’ll finally be able to solve this long-unanswered mystery.” Having finished ridiculing the man, he changed his tone: “Take him away!”

Feng Xiao smothered his laughter. *This man is a force of nature the moment he starts talking.*

After such a massive upheaval, no one was in the mood to continue the banquet. Even the hosts were at a loss, terrified out of their wits.

The Prince of Jin was first to leave. The rest followed his lead and said their farewells in turn. The steward seeing off the guests rushed back and forth, almost tripping over himself in his haste. Between the Zuoyue Bureau still combing the princess’s residence for evidence and the chaos the garden was in, what had once been a scene of a thousand dazzling lights had devolved into a tangled mass of wavering shadows.

The extravagant splendor and prosperity had dissipated like smoke, all within the span of a single song and dance.

Cui Buqu departed surrounded by Zuoyue guards, his cloak like a smudge of harsh night sky trailing in his wake. No one noticed that the fox made of mandarin pith on the table had been deliberately scattered by his hem and was no longer discernible.

Everyone went pale as he passed; not a soul dared stop him. After tonight, his reputation in the capital would likely no longer be that of a meritorious envoy, but instead a harbinger of King Yama.

As soon as he emerged from Qingli Garden, Cui Buqu divided the Zuoyue guards into two groups. One was to remain in the garden and search for physical evidence, while the other was to take Ren Yue and his co-conspirators to the Ministry of Justice’s prison.

As for Cui Buqu himself, he made for his own carriage, accompanied by Qiao Xian. Yet just as he was about to step inside, a hand grabbed his cloak. It was lightning fast, its strength immense. Not only did Qiao Xian fail to react in time, Cui Buqu almost toppled to the ground from being yanked.

He whipped his head around and met Feng Xiao’s innocent gaze. “Daoist Master Cui, you scoundrel. We spent the entire night together, yet you didn’t bring up our promise even once.”

Cui Buqu was silent for a moment. “Three days from now, at Changle Station outside Tonghua Gate. We’ll meet then.”

Feng Xiao smiled. “There, was it really so hard to be direct? Couldn’t you have done it earlier? Instead I must go over and over again to my own debtor to demand repayment. It’s rather shameful, is it not?”

“…Why aren’t you letting go?”

Qiao Xian moved toward Feng Xiao to shove him off, but Feng Xiao was prepared. He met her strikes with his free hand. Qiao Xian was forced onto the defensive, taking several steps back.

Feng Xiao shook his head at her. “You suffered terrible injuries in the Khaganate. We’ve only been back in the capital half a month, and you’ve yet to recover. If Ren Yue had known, perhaps he wouldn’t have surrendered so easily.”

He’d prodded her right in her sore spot. Qiao Xian’s expression turned stormy. “You—!”

“Marquis Cui!”

It was a woman’s voice. Exasperation bubbled up in Cui Buqu. If not for Feng Xiao’s interference, he’d have been long gone by now. Still, he turned. “How may I help Your Grace?”

Duchess Yuwen had come down to the gates, supported by her maid. “Marquis Cui could have privately informed my mother of all this in advance. Had she been prepared, the scene tonight could have been avoided. Instead, this affair is sure to bring shame down on her. Surely, at least in the interest of maintaining relationships, it’s better to offer people a way out? Yet Marquis Cui showed my mother no mercy. Has my lord given any thought to the future?”

“I’ve already reported everything to His Majesty. If Your Grace has any further inquiries, please lay them before him.”

Princess Lanling emerged from the gates just in time to see Duchess Yuwen’s eyes well up with tears. “Did my mother offend Marquis Cui that

he must retaliate against us like this?! If she has, let me kneel and apologize to you on her behalf! Will that be enough?”

Without waiting for Cui Buqu’s response, she sank to her knees and kowtowed, pressing her head to the ground.

Many guests had yet to leave, and the gates were swarming with carriages. All of them witnessed this scene. The onlookers felt a flood of sympathy for Duchess Yuwen—Cui Buqu, they felt, had crossed a line in his conduct toward Princess Leping and her daughter. The two were clearly no threat to the imperial court, but a widow and a fatherless child. What had they done to deserve such treatment?

Princess Lanling rushed forward and bent to help Duchess Yuwen to her feet. This princess was gentle by nature, but she didn’t hold back as she scolded Cui Buqu. “One should show mercy whenever possible. Why do this, Marquis Cui?”

Cui Buqu made no attempt to defend himself. He bade them farewell, then stepped into his carriage, leaving the two young ladies and Feng Xiao behind.

But after sitting down and crossing his legs, a trace of doubt surfaced on his features.

Slowly, the carriage wheels began to turn.

Cui Buqu lifted a corner of the curtain. Princess Lanling was comforting her niece, whose head was bowed as she wiped at her tears. Cui Buqu let the carriage curtain fall.

“Strange,” he murmured.

“What’s strange?”

When one was sitting alone in a carriage talking to oneself and another voice answered, there were only two possibilities: either you’d encountered a ghost, or someone else had snuck onto your carriage.

Cui Buqu jerked around to see a face poking through the curtain on the other side of the carriage. The rest of Feng Xiao followed, sliding smoothly into the carriage too fast for Cui Buqu to stop him.

Feng Xiao flashed him a smile. “I was just thinking that, since you were so busy with that case tonight, you didn’t have time to chat with me.

You must be looking back on the evening with some regret, and so I've come to give you the chance to make it up to me."

Before the words were out of his mouth, Feng Xiao was closing in, pressing Cui Buqu against the wall of the carriage and pinning both his wrists. Feng Xiao's body was flush against his, their noses inches apart and their breaths mingling in the air between them. Cui Buqu could see his own face reflected in Feng Xiao's eyes.

Compared to the cool evening outside, the carriage interior was warm. Cui Buqu could feel himself sweating. But he didn't call out. It wasn't because Feng Xiao had sealed his acupoints, nor that he was entranced by the man's charm. A pair of lips was pressed against his own, mouthing the words one by one: *There's someone—underneath—the carriage.*

# Chapter 93

THERE WERE NO LAMPS in the carriage. Only the bright moonlight trickling in through the swaying carriage curtains provided any illumination. Warm lips moved against Cui Buqu's, murmuring four words with the faintest whisper of breath.

Cui Buqu was stunned.

Why hadn't Feng Xiao simply whispered in his ear? Did he really have to do this mouth to mouth? They were so close even Cui Buqu's lip reading was useless.

But immediately a more vital question occurred to him. Whoever was lurking beneath the carriage must be a high-caliber martial artist, or Qiao Xian would have discovered them. Even among top martial experts, there were disparities in strength. For example, Fo'er had been the Khaganate's foremost expert, but Feng Xiao was still a cut above. Fighting Feng Xiao at his full strength had cost him his life.

Feng Xiao had snuck into Cui Buqu's carriage, feigning intimacy in an attempt to lower their enemy's guard. Did that mean this expert was even stronger than Fo'er? Was Feng Xiao reluctant to attack?

In the dark, the corners of Feng Xiao's lips quirked up. Before Cui Buqu could get a good look, Feng Xiao deepened the kiss. Feng Xiao's lips were soft, but he pressed forward relentlessly.

Cui Buqu’s eyes snapped open. He struggled instinctively, but his strength was vastly inferior to Feng Xiao’s. He was quickly pinned down once more. Feng Xiao’s breath fanned over Cui Buqu’s face. Cui Buqu was sure he wasn’t drunk. Even if he were, someone like Feng Xiao would never lose control.

Why was Feng Xiao doing this? Was it to confuse the assassin hiding beneath the carriage?

At the sight of Cui Buqu furrowing his brow even as his mouth was sealed, Feng Xiao nearly burst out laughing. It seemed far-fetched that there could exist someone who was forever one step ahead of their enemies, always able to anticipate the next move. But Cui Buqu was a far-fetched sort of person. In the Khaganate, he’d used his own life as bait in order to expose Yuxiu. Feng Xiao had grown curious: What if he hadn’t arrived in time, or appeared only at the last moment? Would he then have witnessed a wretched, panicking Cui Buqu?

Unfortunately, he’d missed this prime opportunity. Yuxiu was too powerful; Feng Xiao had been forced to give his all in their fight. He hadn’t been able to entertain himself by putting Cui Buqu in such a perilous position.

And afterward, no matter the situation, Cui Buqu had always remained perfectly calm. He kept a cool head in any crisis, just as he had during the uproar tonight. He’d humiliated Princess Leping before the crown prince, the Prince of Jin, and all her guests, leaving her no way to save face. Feng Xiao was certain that after this incident, Princess Leping wouldn’t feel remotely grateful to Cui Buqu for capturing the rebels. On the contrary, she was sure to despise him.

Yet Cui Buqu showed not the least anxiety or concern over the possibility. Feng Xiao wanted badly to see Cui Buqu overcome with shock or alarm—or even better, see him weeping and begging for mercy. He’d thought it might be difficult to achieve. But right now, he could feel Cui Buqu struggling against him, and just make out the look of surprise on his face. Feng Xiao knew he’d pulled it off.

What a pity the light was too dim for a clear view. Inspiration came to him in a flash, and he thrust his tongue into Cui Buqu’s mouth. It tasted

strongly of medicine, while Feng Xiao's tongue carried the tart-sweetness of mandarins.

"Mmph…"

Unfortunately, Cui Buqu didn't seem fond of the taste of mandarins. He jerked his knee toward Feng Xiao's crotch but came up short and was held down yet again. The faint scent of herbs clung to Cui Buqu's body as well, the result of consuming medicine day after day. The harder he struggled, the stronger the scent became. Feng Xiao felt he was about to turn into a piece of ginseng. He had a sudden thought: Daoist Master Cui had consumed a vast quantity of precious herbs and medicines over his lifetime. If Feng Xiao sliced him up and ate him, would it grant him eternal life?

Outside, the coachman's attention had drifted, and the carriage wheels went right over a stone in the middle of the road. The entire carriage rocked and tilted; as if unable to steady himself, Feng Xiao swayed and rolled to the side with Cui Buqu still fast in his arms.

Cui Buqu took the chance to punch Feng Xiao in the stomach. Just as he braced himself to sit up, a sharp blade drove up through the floor of the carriage. Its tip glinted, cold and ominous, mere inches from where they'd been lying moments ago.

The enemy's attack had missed, but they didn't withdraw. The blade wrenched toward them, as if their attacker could see them through the carriage floor. Feng Xiao grabbed Cui Buqu and sprang upward. The roof of the carriage blew off with a thunderous bang, and the two of them leapt out as a white-clad assassin sprang up from beneath the wheels in close pursuit.

Still in the air, Feng Xiao tossed Cui Buqu to Qiao Xian before turning to engage the white figure in a flurry of blows. Palms and glinting blades flew between them, practically impossible to follow. Any ordinary assassin would have worn black to blend into the darkness. That this man had chosen white was a clear sign of both confidence and arrogance. Despite his conspicuous attire, he'd successfully concealed his presence earlier. Even Qiao Xian hadn't noticed him; she was stunned.

A martial artist capable of holding his own against Feng Xiao had to be well-known in the jianghu. But Cui Buqu was frowning.

He didn’t recognize this person at all.

The man’s techniques were peculiar. Some of his moves resembled the saber techniques of the Southwest Jinchuan Stronghold, though he was seamlessly executing them with a sword instead, the integration of forms as smooth as rippling water. Other moves resembled the Daoist sword techniques of Xuandu Mountain, only more ferocious, bursting with malevolent energy. There was a touch of cold moonlight to his moves, a viciousness that sought to massacre every living thing it encountered.

Each sect had their own unique style, and no one was capable of learning them all. If someone utilized multiple styles, they were either showing off or trying to conceal their background. Clearly this person was doing the latter. His martial arts were superb, yet his appearance was utterly unremarkable. It was a face no one would give a second glance to, and anyone would forget in an instant.

Qiao Xian also noticed something amiss. “Lord Chief, the Zuoyue Bureau has no record of a martial artist of his appearance and training. Has he disguised his face?”

“Perhaps,” Cui Buqu replied cryptically.

Until the sudden appearance of this assassin, tonight had been smooth sailing. Ren Yue had been arrested, the evidence of his revolt collected. Yet Cui Buqu had always had a niggling feeling that Ren Yue wasn’t the true mastermind.

Was this also related to the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai?

As Cui Buqu pondered, Feng Xiao and the man in white moved ever faster. Never mind the terrified coachman; even Qiao Xian stood no chance of stepping in to assist. She could only wait for the duel to decide the victor. The longer she watched, however, the more alarmed she became. Feng Xiao was a superb martial artist. For this assassin to fight him to a draw, the man must be equally formidable.

Who was capable of ordering such an expert to assassinate Cui Buqu? If Feng Xiao hadn’t been in the carriage, Cui Buqu would be breathing his last. What if this man came back for a second attempt? Without a protector equal to Feng Xiao, Cui Buqu’s life would be forfeit.

Qiao Xian’s worry deepened. As irritating as she found Feng Xiao, right now, she hoped with all her heart that Feng Xiao could kill this man. If Feng Xiao succeeded, she promised herself she’d never make trouble for the Jiejian Bureau again, no matter how often their deputy chief kept popping up.

Of course, had she known what had happened inside the carriage, Qiao Xian would likely have hoped Feng Xiao and the assassin would go to the grave together.

Either way, things weren’t looking good. Sword glares swirled around Feng Xiao and the assassin, their qi whipping itself into a funnel that trapped Feng Xiao in its center. The man in white never attacked the same way twice. His movements were eerie: He resembled a specter as he vanished and reappeared, using techniques from the ninja arts of Yamato. But while normal ninja arts were mere optical illusions, this man had incorporated them into his sword techniques, making them far more potent.

Feng Xiao was soon cornered.

The glare from the man in white’s sword blazed like the brilliant light of dawn as it spiraled toward Feng Xiao, ready to slice him to ribbons.

# Chapter 94

THE ASSASSIN'S TARGET was Cui Buqu, and Qiao Xian, his protector, wasn't strong enough to stop him. By all rights, he should be dead—and would have been, if not for the sudden appearance of Feng Xiao.

Not only had Feng Xiao thwarted the assassination, it seemed likely his fight with Cui Buqu's assailant would continue till dawn. The man in white was a proud person; Feng Xiao's meddling enraged him. After a quarter-hour of fighting, Feng Xiao had finally given him an opening. The man in white transformed into an arc of light, soaring into the sky before turning sharply and diving head-first toward Feng Xiao, a curtain of bloodthirsty sword glares surging ahead of him.

It was near midnight, and dense clouds cloaked the moon. All was silent. Even if the common folk in the surrounding buildings had been startled by the noise, they wouldn't dare come out and watch; it'd be wiser to cover their eyes and pretend they hadn't noticed. As for watchmen or patrolling soldiers, if there were any, then they were far away. Other than Feng Xiao and the man in white, the street was empty but for the battered carriage, a coachman shivering beneath the eaves at a distance, and Cui Buqu and Qiao Xian watching from the sidelines. Qiao Xian had fired off a signal flare to hail the Zuoyue Bureau, but even if their people rushed to help, stopping the man in white would be a tall order.

In the moment before those swirling sword glares minced Feng Xiao's head to a paste in a shower of blood, the man in white felt his death would be rather a shame.

Feng Xiao was ostentatious and bombastic; he'd flaunted himself ever since taking the reins of the Jiejian Bureau, and no few people hated him for it. Killing him in public, before the eyes of a crowd, would have been far more satisfying. The Jiejian Bureau would become a bird with a broken wing; without the pillar of their deputy chief to support them, they would be forced to disband.

But even as the thought arose, the man in white realized his sword glare had met an invisible resistance. The brilliant light flickered out, and

the thousand-strong curtain of swords became a single blade once more—a blade held firmly in Feng Xiao's grasp.

Had Feng Xiao used his profound internal strength to grab the blade bare-handed? The man in white was stunned. With no time to think, he yanked the sword back, but it was like the blade was mired in mud, or held in place by a thousand-ton weight. Not only was he unable to pull it free, he found himself being dragged down toward Feng Xiao.

In the distance, the Zuoyue guards approached led by none other than Deputy Chief Zhangsun. His martial arts weren't at Feng Xiao's level, but if they worked together, they stood a good chance at defeating this man in white.

The man in white saw that he had come tonight in vain. He abandoned his sword and withdrew, cutting his losses. He drifted backward with uncanny speed; in a flash, he was far away on a distant rooftop. A few more bounds and he'd melted into the darkness.

Feng Xiao dropped from the roof of a nearby building to Cui Buqu's side. He'd caught the assassin's sword with his bare hand. Blood dripped from his palm. He raised the bloodstained sword with his uninjured hand and studied it. Then he shook his head and tossed it to the ground. "No identifying markings. Who knows where it came from; it's probably just an ordinary sword."

"How's your hand?" asked Cui Buqu. Despite everything, Feng Xiao had saved his life tonight. He knew if he gave him an inch, Feng Xiao would take a mile demanding credit, but even so, it wasn't something he could ignore.

The dark clouds had dispersed, and scattered starlight shone down on them once more. Cui Buqu's lips were flushed redder than usual, slightly swollen, with a barely visible glimmer of wetness upon them.

Qiao Xian had no reason to examine his mouth; these details escaped her notice. It was Feng Xiao who felt the sight weighing on his conscience—not that he thought himself guilty in any way. Still, his gaze swept silently over the Cui Buqu's lips. His head drooped, and suddenly he paled. "Damn! The sword was poisoned!"

Cui Buqu's heart leapt into his throat. He caught Feng Xiao on instinct as he slumped forward and saw a rivulet of blood trickle from Feng Xiao's parted lips. "Qiao Xian, take a look at him, quickly!"

Qiao Xian rushed over and checked his pulse, her brows tightly knit. "His pulse is weak; he's genuinely been poisoned. I don't have any way of treating him here. Lord Chief, let's take him back to the Jiejian Bureau at once, lest any misunderstandings arise!"

Zhangsun Bodhi's arrival had been timely; Cui Buqu left him with instruction to remain behind and clean up the aftermath. He swiftly explained the situation to the city guards and asked them to investigate the man in white before rushing to the Jiejian Bureau with Feng Xiao and Qiao Xian.

The Jiejian Bureau lay within the capital, so it wasn't far—only a fifteen-minute ride. But as Feng Xiao lay in the carriage, his face paled alarmingly. The once-dazzling oleander spirit now more closely resembled a withered blossom. Despite the immense agony of the poison, he insisted on clutching Cui Buqu's wrist, unwilling to let go.

"Qiao Xian. Is his life in danger?" whispered Cui Buqu.

Qiao Xian was shamefaced. "This subordinate has only a basic understanding of medicine; I don't dare draw any hasty conclusions. I've heard the Jiejian Bureau has many skilled physicians, so perhaps they'll know what to do. But Deputy Chief Feng's reserves of internal energy are profound. He shouldn't be in immediate danger."

Feng Xiao's brow was deeply furrowed. Feebly he said, "Stop talking, both of you. My head hurts."

The pair of them snapped their mouths shut.

"It's so uncomfortable lying on my back like this…" murmured Feng Xiao. He struggled to prop himself up on an elbow, then laid his head on Cui Buqu's thigh. Cui Buqu had half a mind to yank his leg away and let him crash to the floor, but he recalled what Feng Xiao had done for him and managed to resist the urge.

"Cui Buqu…"

Cui Buqu hummed in response.

“You…hate me a lot, don’t you?”

“No,” said Cui Buqu.

“Then why…are you being so short with me?”

Cui Buqu rolled his eyes. “Didn’t you just tell us not to talk because your head hurts?”

“My head only throbs…when Qiao Xian talks.”

Qiao Xian shifted restlessly, longing to punch him.

“Buqu, can you…tell me…”

“I can’t.”

Feng Xiao looked up at Cui Buqu weakly, then pressed a hand to his chest and began to cough. When Cui Buqu’s indifferent expression finally softened a little, Feng Xiao spoke up again. “I’ll only ask three questions.”

“One.”

“Two,” insisted Feng Xiao.

Cui Buqu’s lips twitched. *You still have the strength to negotiate*?

“What’s your relationship with Empress Dugu…” Feng Xiao asked quietly. “Why were the Prince of Jin and…”

“Why was Duchess Yuwen so distant and respectful? Why was Princess Leping so wary of me, and the Prince of Jin so familiar?” Cui Buqu finished the question for him.

Feng Xiao’s lips curved slightly. “That’s right.”

“I don’t want to answer that question. Ask something else.”

“But I really want to know,” said Feng Xiao. “Everything about you interests me…” His face went ashen, and he started to gasp for breath. His grip on Cui Buqu’s wrist tightened, but his hand seemed to grow colder.

As he watched that radiantly handsome face gradually lose its glow, a trickle of emotion welled up in Cui Buqu. What surfaced in his heart was not pleasure that he’d rid himself of one of Zuoyue Bureau’s competitors. It was pity.

But pity was all it was. After all, from head to toe, Feng Xiao had only one thing of value to offer: his face.

Cui Buqu spoke slowly. “Emperor Xuan of the previous dynasty was capricious and temperamental. He was always suspicious of the Yang family. But the Duke of Sui’s daughter was empress; he struggled to decide whether or not to usurp the throne. The people around him had differing opinions on the matter, and so he wavered first one way and then another. It was I who came forward to offer advice, laying out the pros and cons of a coup to the future emperor and empress. That’s how they came to their decision.”

Feng Xiao was stunned. He’d entertained all sorts of absurd theories, even speculating that Cui Buqu was the emperor’s illegitimate child or the empress’s lover. Yet he hadn’t anticipated anything like this. Back when the emperor had been merely the Duke of Sui, Cui Buqu had already been his strategist. His counsel had dealt the final blow, reshaping the Northern dynasty forever.

“Then why…” whispered Feng Xiao.

“Afterward, the emperor declared me a meritorious servant of the crown. Mine was deemed a first-class contribution, but to accept the honor would have meant too much pomp and circumstance. That’s not what I wanted. Rather than the glorious chess piece on the front line, I much prefer to be the chess master in the shadows.”

Understanding dawned on Feng Xiao. With this, everything became clear.

Cui Buqu had made an enormous contribution to the realm, yet he hadn’t accepted the credit. This impressed the ruling couple, but it also left them in his debt. This was why they’d put him in charge of the Zuoyue Bureau at such a young age. They placed a high value on his counsel—particularly Empress Dugu, who viewed him as her chief strategist. In this case, it was natural that the Prince of Jin wanted to win Cui Buqu’s favor. As for Princess Leping and her daughter, Cui Buqu was the voice that had cost them their status as empress dowager and princess of the Zhou dynasty. They respected, resented, and feared him at once, muddying the waters between them.

This bit of his history was the ace up Cui Buqu's sleeve, a secret he wouldn't lightly reveal.

But tonight, he'd told Feng Xiao.

Feng Xiao looked up at him and smiled. Then he finally passed out.

When the carriage arrived at the Jiejian Bureau, the members rushed out. They regarded Cui Buqu and Qiao Xian with hostility. Despite Qiao Xian doing her best to explain what had happened, it was difficult to convince them.

"We've escorted him to you, so we'll leave him in your care," Cui Buqu said, turning to leave. He was stopped by Pei Jingzhe.

"My lord was attending a banquet. How did he suffer such grave injury? Until he wakes up, I must ask Cui-xiansheng to remain."

"Let him…go," said Feng Xiao weakly. Supported by servants on either side, he opened his eyes a crack.

"My lord!" Pei Jingzhe couldn't believe his ears. Was this really Deputy Chief Feng, the man who'd never pass up cheap gains if an opportunity should arise? The man who, even if an opportunity didn't arise, would find some way to create one?

"Let them go." Feng Xiao closed his eyes, as if it had taken all his effort to speak.

Pei Jingzhe could do nothing but wave a hand, signaling the Jiejian Bureau members to back off. They reluctantly watched the carriage drive away.

The seriousness of Feng Xiao's injuries had thrown the entire Jiejian Bureau into a state of alarm. The physician was shaken awake in the middle of the night by the third bureau chief, Ming Yue; he grabbed his medicine chest and ran to attend, still rubbing his eyes. Seeing Feng Xiao half-dead at the gates had terrified Pei Jingzhe out of his wits. He stumbled back inside, his legs wobbling. What should they do if something happened to their lord?

But upon staggering into Feng Xiao's room, he found the deputy chief sitting cross-legged on the bed, arm held out obediently as the doctor bandaged a wound on his palm. His complexion was rosy, his eyes bright.

There was no sign of the man who had seemed to be on the verge of death moments ago.

Pei Jingzhe stared at him in shock.

# Chapter 95

PEI JINGZHE STOOD in the doorway and contemplated his life. He had a clear memory of helping Feng Xiao to his room. He'd personally checked his pulse. It'd been weak and irregular, an unmistakable sign of poisoning and serious internal injury. Was Feng Xiao experiencing a final burst of strength before death? Pei Jingzhe's eyes prickled with tears.

Feng Xiao glanced up to find him standing there with his face turning from green to white and back again. Confused, he asked, "Did someone seal your acupoints?"

Before Pei Jingzhe could answer, a middle-aged man in dark blue robes rushed in, gasping out Feng Xiao's courtesy name: "Yuntian, these are the nine transformation pills of our sect. When someone is gravely injured or near death, it can put them in a suspended state…" Third Chief Ming Yue lapsed into silence. Both he and Pei Jingzhe stared blankly at Feng Xiao, who was suddenly bursting with vitality.

Ming Yue was first to return to his senses. "It was an act?"

"By using the Turtle Breathing technique while sealing the meridians, one can make oneself appear convincingly close to death. I'm probably the only person in the world who's thought of combining the two," Feng Xiao said gleefully.

The Turtle Breathing technique was used to fake death as a means of escape, while sealing the meridians could slow the spread of poison. But both were emergency measures, used only in a desperate situation. Who would think to use them for fun?

Ming Yue's lips twitched. "In other words, only your palm was injured. Did you really need to go so far to make someone owe you a life debt?"

Feng Xiao arched a brow. "But see here, not only did I cheat death, I also learned a valuable secret. Don't you think it was worth it?"

Ming Yue had no idea what he was getting at. "You want the Zuoyue Bureau to owe you a favor?"

Feng Xiao smiled. “What value does the Zuoyue Bureau have? Without Cui Buqu, it’s akin to a person with their heart cut out.”

The longer Ming Yue listened, the more confused he became. Feng Xiao waved a hand. “Don’t worry about it. In three days, I’ll be embarking on a lengthy trip to Boling-Anping with Cui Buqu. Lao-San,[5] I leave the Jiejian Bureau in your care.”

Ming Yue—*bright moon*. A poetic and sentimental name. From the meaning of the characters, most would imagine a tender woman, as gentle as the moon’s light on water. Alas, reality was a cruel thing. Not only was Ming Yue a man, he was a simple and honest one, with a plain and unremarkable face. He rose earlier than the cock’s crow and went to bed later than the dogs. At the Jiejian Bureau, the chief was a leader in name only, and the deputy chief was always running hither and thither. The third chief Ming Yue skipped countless meals and forwent hours of precious sleep, toiling away to keep the bureau running day to day. He was the linchpin of the whole organization.

Thus when he heard Feng Xiao’s instructions, he simply nodded. “Not a problem. Please rest assured, all will be taken care of here.”

Pei Jingzhe at last shook himself out of his stupor. “May I accompany you, my lord?”

Feng Xiao sneered. “Last time you came with me, I cut your salary for the entire year down to nothing. I fear that if you come along, you’ll lose next year’s salary as well!”

“This subordinate has made great progress!” Pei Jingzhe protested, deeply aggrieved.

Feng Xiao raised two fingers. “I’ll give you these choices. One: You follow me. For every mistake you make, I’ll deduct a month’s salary, with no limit to how many months can be lost. Two: You can run an errand for me. If you succeed, not only will I return your docked salary, I’ll double it.”

Pei Jingzhe didn’t think twice. “I choose the second!”

Nodding in satisfaction, Feng Xiao gave his assent. At the thought of recovering his lost wages, Pei Jingzhe’s mood soared. He excused himself, delighted.

Ming Yue watched Pei Jingzhe leave looking like he was walking on air. He smiled. “You wanted him to pick the second option from the start.”

“There’s no way he’ll complete that errand,” said Feng Xiao. “At most, he’ll manage half of what I ask him. If we tally all the deductions and bonuses, we can simply return him the salary that was cut. No need to give him more than that.”

Ming Yue was rather at a loss. “Deputy Chief, I think you might be mistaken about your background. Maybe you should send someone to investigate.”

Feng Xiao shot him a quizzical look. “Investigate what?”

“Investigate if there’s a family in the Northern dynasty with the surname Cheap, who lost a son named Skate over twenty years ago.”

Unfortunately, Feng Xiao had been thick-skinned from birth. Not only was he unembarrassed, he proudly explained his reasons. “That fool Pei Jingzhe never uses his brain. Today he gifted flowers to the young lady next door. Tomorrow he’ll go help young maiden Song sell her pastries. Does he really think I don’t know? He’s undisciplined; an unhewn jade cannot be made useful. Young people like him don’t need such high salaries, they merely need enough to make ends meet. Any more than that, and he’ll squander it on wine and women!”

The position of most handsome man in the Jiejian Bureau naturally belonged to Feng Xiao. There were likely precious few people in the Sui dynasty who could match him for good looks.

But a face too arresting could also be isolating; people became afraid to get close. Such was the case with the young ladies Feng Xiao had mentioned: they’d initially been dazzled by his appearance but ultimately decided someone fresh-faced and sweet like Pei Jingzhe was a better choice for starting a family. Pei Jingzhe was always coming in and out of the bureau, and had become a favorite with all the young ladies in the neighborhood.

If Cui Buqu had been there, he’d have called Feng Xiao jealous. But Ming Yue was an honest man; he simply rubbed his nose, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

“There’s one more thing I’d like you to look into,” said Feng Xiao.

Ming Yue’s ears perked up.

“Investigate Princess Leping and Linlang Pavilion. I want to know anything that might connect them to the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai.”

“Surely that’s impossible!” Ming Yue’s surprise was plain on his face. “Princess Leping is a Yang! Do you truly suspect she’s the mastermind behind tonight’s plot?” Though Ming Yue hadn’t attended the thousand-lantern banquet, he’d already heard the gist of what happened.

“Which do you think is preferable—being a princess, or being the empress dowager?” asked Feng Xiao.

While Ming Yue was momentarily speechless, Feng Xiao continued: “How about being the emperor’s daughter, or being the emperor’s mother?”

“But the young emperor of the previous dynasty wasn’t the princess’s son,” protested Ming Yue. “And the current emperor actually is her father. There’s a difference between a father by blood and a stepson.”

Feng Xiao nodded. “That’s true in theory, but don’t forget: Princess Leping is extraordinarily stubborn. She was full of resentment when the current dynasty was established. She argued with the emperor and empress in public, and even threatened to take her own life. Though she’s relented over time, her attitude toward Cui Buqu makes it clear she’s never fully let go of the past. She doesn’t dare hold a grudge against her parents, so she’s directed her resentment toward Cui Buqu instead.”

“That’s only speculation,” said Ming Yue. “What else do you have to base this theory on?”

“Whoever ambushed me from beneath the carriage tonight was a superb martial artist. How could a kept man like Ren Yue have the resources to hire such a formidable expert?”

“You think there’s someone behind Ren Yue, and that this person may also be connected to the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai and Princess Leping.”

Feng Xiao thought for a moment, then said slowly, “Perhaps Princess Leping herself is the mastermind behind the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai.”

Ming Yue was speechless. It was an audacious theory—too audacious—but after hearing Feng Xiao’s reasoning, he couldn’t dismiss it as wild

and unfounded. The realization chilled him. “But Princess Leping really doesn’t seem like the scheming type. The previous dynasty is no more. Even if she slaughters her father and brothers, it won’t restore the Yuwen clan. Surely she doesn’t intend to declare herself ruler?”

Feng Xiao rubbed his chin. “Bold guesses aren’t necessarily a bad thing,” he said. “I’m sure Cui Buqu’s also considered this possibility. In any case, take some men and start investigating first thing tomorrow. Keep it secret, and keep an eye on Princess Leping. With enough digging, I’m certain you’ll discover something interesting.”

He added with some glee, “This time, the Jiejian Bureau must remain a step ahead of the Zuoyue Bureau. Don’t let them steal the show. A defeated Cui Buqu, forced to swallow his dissatisfaction? I can’t imagine anything better!”

Ming Yue didn’t know what to say. After a moment he observed, “Cui Buqu doesn’t know you faked your injury. A man on the verge of death isn’t going to be bounding about, ready to head off to Boling, after a mere three days. Do you really think Cui Buqu is so gullible?”

Feng Xiao’s smile froze on his face. He rubbed his jaw, now looking solemn. “You’re right. Three days isn’t enough time. Tomorrow, send someone to tell him my injuries are slow to heal. Ask him to wait another five days while I recuperate.”

An idea came to Ming Yue. “Should we tell them the poison’s deadly and you might not recover? That way he’ll come see you.”

“No, you don’t understand that Cui fellow. He’s like a touchy old mule. You have to soothe him, stroke his fur in the right direction. He’s clever and mistrustful; the more someone wishes him to do something, the less willing he is to do it. If we say too much, he’ll become suspicious. Keep it brief.”

Ming Yue’s lips twitched again. “As you wish. I’m going back to bed!”

Feng Xiao lay down and drew the covers over himself. He closed his eyes. “If I’m to play the invalid, I’ll do it properly. From now on, I’m a gravely wounded patient, too weak to do anything. Blow out the candle for me before you go.”

Once again, Ming Yue was speechless.

Feng Xiao listened until Ming Yue's footsteps faded into the distance. Then he opened his eyes and gazed out the open window. The hazy moonlight upon the window paper brought to mind the starry glow that had earlier gilded the carriage curtains.

The swaying carriage, the soft cushions, and a pale face.

Feng Xiao clicked his tongue. A plain and unremarkable face, not even one-tenth as attractive as his own. What good was such a face? But the moans that had escaped those lips hadn't been grating to the ear.

He touched his own lips. He'd done it partly out of curiosity, and partly because he'd wanted to test something. But the curiosity had yet to fade, and this test seemed to have netted him a quite specific answer.

"I may be in a bit of trouble," he murmured to himself.

If, in the future, there came a brilliant opportunity to set up Cui Buqu…would he take it?

# Chapter 96

EIGHT DAYS PASSED without incident. Beyond sending someone to deliver medicines to the gates of the Jiejian Bureau, there had been no movement from the Zuoyue Bureau. Until Feng Xiao spotted Cui Buqu outside the Tonghua Gate on the appointed day, as promised, he'd almost thought Cui Buqu had forgotten their agreement entirely.

Cui Buqu was sitting in a carriage reading. When he saw Feng Xiao, he didn't greet him with his usual indifference. Instead, he was courteous and amiable—he even took the initiative to bow and ask after his health. "It's been eight days. How is Deputy Chief Feng doing?"

For a moment, Feng Xiao wondered if this was someone else in disguise.

They stared at each other. Cui Buqu's face was inscrutable.

Now that was the correct expression. Feng Xiao climbed into the carriage, at ease. "Not well." He sighed softly and extended his palm. "Look, the wound has yet to heal. It aches whenever it's cloudy or raining."

"The weather these past eight days has been clear and cloudless," Cui Buqu reminded him.

Feng Xiao recalled Cui Buqu's perfect memory. Face straight, he replied without missing a beat, "That's right. There wasn't any rain, but after the wound scabbed over, it ached and itched every night. It was difficult to sleep. Thinking back to that battle, that man's martial arts were truly beyond my expectations. I never anticipated that he poisoned the sword."

Cui Buqu peered at Feng Xiao's outstretched palm. A shallow scar marred the skin, just as he'd said. Though it would fade with time, Feng Xiao was a narcissist. He couldn't tolerate the slightest flaw in his appearance.

"Deputy Chief Feng saved my life. I've engraved the favor in my heart, and will never forget it," Cui Buqu said softly.

Feng Xiao blinked. He felt that Cui Buqu was acting strangely today. But after saying those words, Cui Buqu didn't continue.

"So?"

"So what?" asked Cui Buqu.

Feng Xiao was unhappy. "In eight days, you never came to thank me."

"That's because I was busy tracking down the man who wounded you," said Cui Buqu innocently.

"Did you find him?"

Cui Buqu shook his head. "He's vanished without a trace, as if he was never there. Fortunately, I managed to discover something else. Consider it my way of partially repaying Deputy Chief Feng for saving my life."

"What did you discover?"

Cui Buqu smiled. "The poison on that sword was incredibly toxic. Eight days isn't enough to purge it. I found a legendary doctor and learned some acupuncture from him. With this, I guarantee I can neutralize the poison and remove it fully from your body."

He took out a cloth bag, from which he removed a silver needle.

Feng Xiao was silent. The needle was about three inches long, with a wide base tapering to a sharp point. If it pierced him, he feared it wouldn't remove the poison, but his life. A muscle in his cheek jumped. "I've never seen such a thick needle before. Someone must have been toiling away over the past few days to make it; it looks like it cost no small effort."

"The more serious the illness, the more potent the cure must be," said Cui Buqu warmly. "You mustn't refuse treatment, Deputy Chief Feng. Here, let me prick you twice. That ought to do it."

After a drawn-out pause, Feng Xiao asked, "When did you realize?"

He'd thought his act unimpeachable. When they met today, he'd made sure his voice was feeble, as it would be after a severe illness. His complexion was pale. If Cui Buqu had checked his pulse, he'd have found it

faint and fluttering. Feng Xiao had been thoroughly prepared, certain Cui Buqu would be none the wiser.

Yet Cui Buqu had seen right through him.

Cui Buqu casually threw the needle away and sneered. “Deputy Chief Feng, did you forget that the assassin left his sword behind? You were supposedly poisoned, yet the blade was clean.”

The sword had been turned over to Zhangsun Bodhi at the scene. Though he hadn’t been able to use it to identify the man in white, Cui Buqu was a meticulous person; of course he’d inquired about the poison.

Feng Xiao rubbed his nose. *A thousand clever strategies can’t make up for a single misstep*. At the time, he’d been so focused on playing dead to distract Cui Buqu from what happened in the carriage that he’d forgotten all about the sword. “But I was still injured saving your life,” he protested. “That wasn’t fake.”

Cui Buqu scoffed. “If not for that, would I be sitting here now speaking so politely to you?”

Displeased, Feng Xiao said, “Either way, I saved you. Can’t you treat me a little more gently?”

At that, Cui Buqu really did flash him a gentle smile. “If not for me,” he whispered, “Deputy Chief Feng would have found himself in hot water that night at Qingli Garden. So many nobles and members of the royal family were there. If you alone had managed to escape, you’d certainly have been questioned afterward. Let’s consider it even.”

Feng Xiao shuddered. “Fine, let’s start over from square one!”

Cui Buqu sneered slightly and dropped all pretense. “I have something to ask Deputy Chief Feng.”

This was the Cui Buqu Feng Xiao knew. Feng Xiao was inexplicably relieved; he waved his fan. “Ask away.”

Having been exposed, Feng Xiao no longer pretended any weakness. He leaned back against the cushions, once again the languid Deputy Chief Feng who cared not a whit for rules.

Cui Buqu nailed him with a stare. “That night in the carriage, why did Deputy Chief Feng treat me with such disrespect?”

Feng Xiao feigned obliviousness. “That assassin thrust his sword through the carriage floor. If I hadn’t grabbed you and rolled aside, how could we have dodged?”

Cui Buqu narrowed his eyes. “What about before that?”

“Before that,” Feng Xiao said slowly, “I was listening for the assassin’s movements.”

“You clearly assaulted me!”

Feng Xiao assumed a look of surprise. “Oh yes, I remember! I was trying to confuse the assassin and lull him into lowering his guard. It was a last resort. Surely you understand, Daoist Master Cui?”

His face shone with righteousness, his voice perfectly solemn. He grinned at Cui Buqu, the very picture of honesty and selflessness. They looked at each other for a long moment. Finally, Cui Buqu snorted coldly and asked no more. He picked up his book and began to read.

Feng Xiao didn’t fail to notice that Cui Buqu’s ears were faintly pink. Suddenly he smiled.

When Feng Xiao had kissed Cui Buqu that night, Cui Buqu had struggled fiercely, his shock turning to anger as he discovered he couldn’t break free. He’d been so furious his ears had flushed red. The same thing was happening now: His ears were quivering, his eyes reddened in the corners, his lips glimmering with moisture. His confused state was adorable.

It all meant only one thing. Daoist Master Cui might look calm on the surface, but his heart was boiling with fury as he plotted revenge on Feng Xiao. Even if the book he was reading was a stately work of philosophy like the *Daodejing*, in his mind it had probably become *The Thirty-Six Stratagems*.[6] Having discovered this small secret about Cui Buqu, Feng Xiao silently rejoiced.

Cui Buqu refused to engage with him. He wouldn’t even look up.

Each sat in their own corner of the carriage, enjoying a moment of peace with their own thoughts. For now, they had called a ceasefire.

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As Qiao Xian’s wounds had yet to heal, Cui Buqu had ordered her to stay behind. Instead, he’d brought two Zuoyue guards. Feng Xiao was traveling even lighter: He’d brought no companions at all. It was a party of four people with a minimum of luggage.

Their carriage headed east from Daxing City, traveling by day and resting at night. It wasn’t long before they reached the outskirts of Anping in Boling Commandery.

Though the northern and southern regions of the Central Plains were two separate nations, the north, now under Sui rule, had been stable for some time. This was thanks to the diligent effort of the previous dynasty’s Emperor Wu of Zhou, Yuwen Yong, as well as several bold and decisive measures undertaken after the establishment of the Sui dynasty. The official roads were well-maintained and safe to travel, with little risk of robbers or bandits.

They arrived at Anping late in the day, when the city gates were already shut; they wouldn’t be able to enter until the next morning. Fortunately, relay stations dotted the outskirts of the city. Any travelers who failed to pass through before the gates closed would stop there to rest. Over time, a number of teahouses had sprung up, and what had been a bare handful of households had become several dozen—thus a new village was born. When Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu came up on it at twilight, it was bustling with activity.

Outside the relay station, staff had emerged to lead the horses away while the two Zuoyue guards went inside to speak to the innkeeper. Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao sat outside the teahouse, each with a cup of clear tea in front of them. They gazed out at the sun sinking behind the distant mountains and listened to the cheerful clamor of the market, drinking in the atmosphere of the place with their tea.

The teahouse wasn’t large; when every seat was occupied, it quickly became cramped. Feng Xiao barely had to lean over to nudge Cui Buqu in the ribs. “Look over there.”

Cui Buqu had been taking a sip when Feng Xiao poked his side; he almost spit out his mouthful of tea.

Feng Xiao sputtered a laugh. “You’re ticklish!”

Cui Buqu was considering pouring the tea over Feng Xiao’s head when he heard a voice from beside him.

“It’s quite crowded here; there aren’t many seats. Could I ask the gentleman to move a little to the left?”

The voice was as crisp and clear as the song of a valley oriole. Even without turning, Cui Buqu knew it belonged to a young maiden. He hummed and scooted a little closer to Feng Xiao before looking up at the newcomer.

The moment he saw her, he froze.

# Chapter 97

THE GIRL was no more than eighteen, in the spring of her youth. Her hair was pulled into braids that hung down to her waist, her complexion dewy and radiant. She wore robes the green of rippling lake water, or perhaps fluttering willow leaves. Yet though she was young and fresh-faced, she couldn’t be classed as a beauty, let alone the kind that made someone stop in their tracks.

Three people sat with her. One was a maid, the second an elderly man with a snowy beard. The third was a young boy carrying a medicine chest.

“Thank you, sir.” The girl in green boldly took a seat beside Cui Buqu. When her gaze alighted upon Feng Xiao, she gaped at him.

Almost every young girl had the same reaction when they saw this man. After so many years of it, he’d grown indifferent to the attention. He simply poured his tea; no amount of staring could make his hand tremble.

The girl in green was a high-born young lady. Though she was curious, she didn’t speak rashly. It was the old man who took the initiative to strike up a conversation with Cui Buqu.

“This young master looks unwell. Do you often find yourself plagued by illnesses and coughing?”

“I do,” said Cui Buqu. “I was born sick but was fortunate enough to survive. Now I’m just holding on, taking one day at a time.”

“If you don’t mind,” said the old man, “may I check your pulse?”

Cui Buqu gave the man a small smile. “Thank you very much for your kindness, sir. I’m afraid I was poisoned in the womb, and it’s settled deep in my body. Reversing it is beyond the abilities of mortal men. Please don’t trouble yourself.”

The old man understood he was being politely rebuffed. He sighed, then produced a ceramic bottle from his lapels and placed it in Cui Buqu’s hands. “These are heart-cleansing pills this old man made himself, concocted from common plants like licorice and goji berries. They can unclog the meridians of your lungs, detoxify your liver, and moderate your internal heat. The young master should take two pills per day. While they can’t cure serious illnesses, they’ll still nourish your body. If you take them diligently, over time, you’ll feel the effects.”

This time Cui Buqu didn’t refuse. He took the bottle of medicine. “Thank you very much, sir. May I ask the price?”

The old man’s shoulders shook in a hearty laugh. “As I said, the ingredients are all common plants and cost very little. If you find that they help, come to Baoning Hall in Anping to purchase more.”

“In that case, it would be rude of me to decline,” said Cui Buqu.

They were still talking when a carriage stopped outside—another party who’d come too late to enter the city. An elderly man alighted, followed by a young child. The man’s eyesight must have been excellent; he spotted the old man beside Cui Buqu even at a distance.

“Doctor Sun!” With a look of surprised pleasure, the elderly man took his grandson’s hand and led the child over to greet him. “I didn’t expect to meet you here. Are you heading back to the city?”

Sun Jimin patted the boy’s head and said kindly, “I am, but I was a bit too late. It seems I’ll have to enter early tomorrow morning. Where are you two going?”

“I was taking my grandson back to my hometown. Dalang, pay your respects to Grandpa Sun!” He pushed the child’s head down in a bow.

Sun Jimin chuckled. “No need for such courtesies. Please, rise.”

“We must,” insisted the old man. “A man must not be ungrateful. This child should always remember the kindness Doctor Sun did us!”

People came and went from the teahouse, and some who weren’t locals grew curious about this old man and his grandson. Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao took the chance to listen as the story was shared.

It seemed the old man’s surname was Cong, and he had only one son. When this little grandson of his was born, his daughter-in-law had a difficult labor—she hemorrhaged and almost died. They’d been a poor household at that time, without money for a midwife. The family could only helplessly watch as the young woman’s life slowly drained away. By a great stroke of fortune, Sun Jimin passed by the house and heard the wailing inside. Heedless of the squalor, the good doctor had rushed inside with his young assistant and personally delivered the child. Both mother and son were safe and sound, and he’d prescribed the young woman some medicine to restore her to health. Seeing that the Cong family was destitute, he hadn’t asked for single copper. He’d paid for it out of his own pocket, and several times even sent his assistant to deliver more.

Later, the old man’s son apprenticed himself to a merchant group and traveled far and wide. With the keen insight gained from his experiences, the Cong family’s situation gradually improved, and by the time his own son was five, they’d transformed into an affluent household. Yet they never forgot the grace they received. They named their grandson Nianen, meaning *in memory of kindness*, and sent Doctor Sun poultry and fish every time there was a festival.

The girl in green finally spoke up. “Doctor Sun used to run his own clinic, but he couldn’t stand to see his patients suffering when they couldn’t afford medicine and kept waiving the cost. Over time, he could no longer keep the clinic open that way, so he came to our Baoning Hall to work for us instead. But he still insists on waiving fees for the first ten patients he sees every day. Patients who can’t afford to pay will line up outside the hall the night before their appointments.”

“And how should I address you, miss…?” asked Cui Buqu. “Are you one of Doctor Sun’s apprentices as well?”

The girl smiled. “My surname is Cui. I’m the ninth-born, so you can call me Cui-jiuniang. I do wish to learn medicine from Doctor Sun, but he refuses to accept me as a pupil. I was only permitted to accompany him in his work after pleading with both him and the elders of my household.”

At her words, Sun Jimin turned from chatting with the grandfather and grandson. “Practicing medicine is a lifelong commitment. One must memorize medical texts and learn to recognize all manner of herbs. Great doctors cannot remain in one place; they have a duty to travel the world helping others. You’re a young lady from a noble family, brought up with every comfort. When you come of age, you should marry and raise your children in peace. Why pursue such a difficult path?”

“Doctor Sun, every day I rise at dawn and follow you out of the city to visit villages, pick herbs, and perform diagnoses. Does this not demonstrate my sincerity in wanting to become your apprentice?” Cui-jiuniang asked earnestly.

Sun Jimin sighed. “Jiuniang, I’ve known your grandfather for many years. I watched you grow up. He only agreed to let you follow me for a few days. If he’d known you wished to study medicine seriously, he’d never have allowed it.”

“If I have to, I’ll beg him until he agrees!” the girl declared.

At this point, Feng Xiao, who had been listening quietly, interrupted. “Please forgive my rudeness. May I ask if Jiuniang is a member of the Cui clan of Boling?”

Cui Jiuniang blinked. “That I am, but I’m afraid the two gentlemen have the advantage of me.”

Feng Xiao didn’t bat an eye. “Surname Pei, given name Jingzhe—a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’ve been traveling the world, seeking to expand my knowledge. I’ve heard the Cui family hosts a literary festival around this time every year. I lack experience, but I’ve been hoping to attend and absorb what I can from watching the master scholars.” He pointed at Cui Buqu. “This is a fellow scholar I met along the way. We got on so well that we decided to travel together. His name is—”

“Feng Xiao,” Cui Buqu cut in. “Feng as in *phoenix*. Xiao as in *high heavens*.”

Feng Xiao blinked.

“What a beautiful name!” exclaimed Cui-niangzi.

“I wish I agreed,” said Cui Buqu. “But I find it too vulgar. I was a weak and sickly child, so my mother nicknamed me A-Gou—*dog*—in hopes that a humble name would ward off misfortune. Personally, I think A-Gou is a better name. Cui-jiuniang may also call me Feng A-Gou.”

The corners of Feng Xiao’s mouth spasmed, and he jabbed Cui Buqu hard in the ribs below the table. Cui Buqu almost leapt out of his seat.

“Feng-gongzi, what’s wrong?!” cried Cui-niangzi.

“A pesky rat has followed me this entire journey,” said Cui Buqu. “The wretched thing keeps trying to bite me; just now, it bit me again.”

Alarmed, Cui-jiuniang looked around in alarm. “Where is the rat?!”

“Worry not; I drove it away,” said Feng Xiao. “But what about this literary festival? Please do tell us, Jiuniang.”

The moment he said her name, Cui-jiuniang forgot all about the rat. “That’s right—the first festival was organized by my fourth uncle, Cui Pei. As it grew in fame, so did the number of attendees, and my grandfather decided it would be held annually in the fifth month of the year—between late spring and early summer. This year’s theme is pomegranate flowers. I heard the new commandery governor will participate as well—it should be a rare sight! My grandfather is a generous man, and he has a great appreciation for young talent. Since both gentlemen here are scholars, why not come with me to meet him? If he takes a liking to you, you can stay at the Cui residence. That way you won’t need to look for an inn; you can save yourselves some money.”

Although she addressed them both, her gaze hardly strayed from Feng Xiao. It was clear whom she was really interested in, and equally clear that she hoped Feng Xiao would agree. Feng Xiao’s attention, however, was elsewhere. When Cui-jiuniang had mentioned her grandfather, a faint sneer had curled Cui Buqu’s lips. Though it’d disappeared as quickly as it’d come, it hadn’t escaped Feng Xiao’s notice.

“Wouldn’t that be too much trouble?” Feng Xiao asked, hesitant. “We only just met you after all…”

Cui-jiuniang smiled. “It’s nothing to worry about! My grandfather and fourth uncle often invite passing scholars to stay the night. Since my fourth uncle isn’t home at the moment, you’ll have to meet my grandfather first. If you show enough promise, my grandfather is certain to welcome you both as honored guests.”

Feng Xiao, now the image of youthful eagerness, readily agreed. “Then of course we’ll meet him! We aren’t unsophisticated fools who only know how to fish for praise.”

Cui-jiuniang smiled sweetly. “It’s settled then. We’ll enter the city together tomorrow!”

By now, their rooms at the inn had been tidied and prepared. As the sky purpled with dusk and the teahouse made ready to close for the evening, everyone finished their conversations and retired to their beds. This was a busy relay station on the outskirts of a city; changing the bedding every day was impractical—even once a month was a luxury. Feng Xiao looked everywhere for the innkeeper to ask him to change the sheets, to no avail. Even so, he refused to compromise.

Cui Buqu had just finished washing when he heard from the Zuoyue guards that Feng Xiao had moved all the pillows and cushions from the carriage into his own room. He saw at once what Feng Xiao was trying to do. Cui Buqu waved the guards away and stepped into the neighboring room.

The fragrant scent of soap accosted him the moment he entered. Deputy Chief Feng was lying on his side on the bed, his long hair loose and damp from his bath. Head propped in one hand, he had one leg drawn up casually as he tossed a dried fruit into his mouth. A porter stood beside him, flipping through a book and reciting melodiously: “The sun was high in the sky, yet Lady Song took her maids and left the city to offer incense at Yufo Temple. As she ascended the stone steps of the temple, the weather turned, and a mighty storm…”

He recognized the porter as the one who’d earlier been leading guests to their rooms and running errands. The man appeared to be more or less literate, having sung the names of the inn’s various dishes as he’d escorted them upstairs. It seemed Feng Xiao had put the man’s skills to immediate use.

Cui Buqu looked at the inn’s original bedding, now piled high atop the table. Feng Xiao narrowed his eyes and beckoned to Cui Buqu, who was hovering in the doorway. “Come in, A-Gou. Why are you standing there?”

After a moment of silence, Cui Buqu said seriously, “I want to know something. Do the top ten martial masters all act this way in private?”

# Chapter 98

FENG XIAO SPUTTERED a laugh. “Ququ, you’re such a joker. Consider those other top martial masters. Are any of them as handsome and graceful as me?”

“I don’t know if they’re handsome or graceful,” said Cui Buqu without expression. “But if we’re speaking of top martial masters…” He pointed at the cushions squashed under Feng Xiao. “I fear none of them are as thick-skinned as you.”

Feng Xiao clicked his tongue. “You gave out my name earlier and I didn’t even complain. What’s there to worry about. Come now, I’ll leave you half the bed here tonight.”

Cui Buqu wasn’t as fastidious as Feng Xiao, but it had been far too long since this inn had washed and aired its bedding. He could smell the staleness of the sheets from where he stood, and a closer examination revealed snot, blood, and tea stains, as well as some mysterious yellow spots whose origins he didn’t dare contemplate. Truth be told, Cui Buqu found it hard to stomach. Even the floor seemed cleaner.

After wavering at length between sleeping on the floor and sharing a bed with Feng Xiao, he reluctantly chose the latter. There was no sense in torturing himself. The floor was cold and hard, and while perhaps most people could sleep on it for a night with no ill effects, it would certainly make Cui Buqu sick.

Feng Xiao waved a hand and threw a few copper coins to the porter. The man happily pocketed the money and left, closing the door behind him.

Cui Buqu was in chronically poor health and prone to fatigue. If he didn’t get a good night’s sleep, he’d be only more exhausted the next day. He had no interest in bickering with Feng Xiao. He lay down in his robes and was soon fast asleep.

But on the other side of the bed, Feng Xiao was wide awake. He tossed and turned. These inn beds were far from sturdy, and the frame creaked whenever Feng Xiao turned over, which he did frequently. First he

faced left, then right. He turned to lay flat on his back, then faced left again…

Cui Buqu couldn't take it anymore. He sat up. "Are you going to sleep or not?"

"I have a question," said Feng Xiao innocently. "If I don't get an answer, I'm afraid I won't be able to sleep."

"I only promised to bring you here to look for Yuyin." Cui Buqu's voice was chilly. "Tomorrow, Cui-jiuniang will take us to meet Cui Yong, the head of the Cui family. That's your chance. From there, how you acquire the qin is up to you." He turned over and pulled the covers back over himself, ignoring Feng Xiao.

Feng Xiao smiled. "Ququ, if you're going to be so hard-hearted, you could have sent someone in your stead or simply pointed me in the right direction. Why come all the way here with me in person? Could it be…"

They were mere inches from each other on the bed. When he leaned forward a little, Feng Xiao could smell the soap in Cui Buqu's hair. This man's hair was nothing like his awful temper. It was soft and smooth, though thinner than average thanks to his poor health.

"Could it be that Daoist Master Cui came here with another purpose?" Feng Xiao drawled.

Cui Buqu lay with his back toward him, completely still.

Feng Xiao's smile never wavered. "When you first saw Cui-jiuniang, your face froze. I took a close look at her—her eyes really do resemble yours. You must be closely related to the Cui family. Perhaps you're even Cui-jiuniang's brother. Yet after all these years, they have no idea you exist. It seems you don't want any connection with them—which means you're here for something else. The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, perhaps?"

He prattled on. "Back when you shared that Ning Shewo, the leader of the Jinhuan Guild, was heading north, I told you I'd also received a message. Do you remember? I wasn't lying. It's a message you'd find very useful. If you want to know more, I'm happy to talk about it."

Cui Buqu still didn't so much as twitch.

Feng Xiao found it hard to believe that Cui Buqu could fall asleep so quickly. He leaned over for a look, only to realize there was something stuffed in Cui Buqu's ears.

Feng Xiao blinked down in astonishment at the two balls of white cotton peeking from beneath Cui Buqu's hair.

A smile tugged at the corner of Cui Buqu's lips. He dreamt that he shoved Feng Xiao into a deep pit. He watched Feng Xiao jump up and down at the bottom, shouting at him, all while he stood up above, arms crossed in satisfaction.

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With his ears stuffed with cotton, Cui Buqu slumbered in blissful silence. No irritating noises could penetrate, and following that wonderful dream, he slept soundly through the night until he woke naturally the next morning.

He turned over and saw that the other side of the bed was empty—Feng Xiao was nowhere to be found. From beyond the door came the murmur of conversation.

Cui-jiuniang had risen at dawn to wash. She stood in the courtyard in an odd pose, but smiled when Feng Xiao emerged. "Pei-gongzi!"

Feng Xiao walked over. "Is Jiuniang practicing the five-beast exercise?"

"Yes," she said awkwardly. "Doctor Sun taught it to me just a short while ago. I'm afraid it's a bit embarrassing."

"No need to put yourself down," said Feng Xiao. "I've also practiced the five-beast exercise before. I can see you've made good progress with it already. The Cui family has a prestigious reputation and has produced many great talents over the centuries. It's only natural that you're also talented and clever, as well as a quick learner."

Cui-jiuniang's cheeks went red at his praise. "Pei-gongzi flatters me. The real clever one in our family is my older cousin, Cui Fei. He was a precocious child; by fifteen, he was famous in the city for his outstanding

literary talent. Right now, he's working with some others on our county annals. The former commandery governor wishes to recommend him to the court."

Her voice was warm with pride. Feng Xiao listened with a smile until he found the right moment to interject. "What about your other relatives? I trust they're all quite exceptional?"

Cui-jiuniang shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Other than my cousin, the rest are… Some died young, while others have begun raising their own families. The only one my age who's still studying at home is my fifth brother."

Cui-jiuniang's grandfather, Cui Yong, had four sons. The eldest was over fifty, good-natured but not particularly capable. If nothing went awry, he'd inherit the family business one day.

The second son had passed when still a young man, some thirty years ago.

The third son, Cui Lin, was of mediocre talent, and had two children of his own: a son and a daughter. His daughter was Cui-jiuniang, and his son was Cui Bin, the fifth brother she'd mentioned.

The fourth son, Cui Pei, was known for his gift in poetry. He traveled frequently and had many friends across the land. He was Cui Yong's youngest and most favored child.

The Cui clan was well-known in Boling Commandery, and a prominent family within their local circle. Upon being instated, all new commandery governors came to pay their respects. These old aristocratic families enjoyed great status and prestige; even the imperial family tread carefully around them. The Yang family, current rulers of Great Sui, was itself a famous clan from Guanzhong. All these powerful clans shared close ties. Their relationship to the imperial family wasn't like that of the common people, who saw the emperor as a distant and awe-inspiring figure.

The family's notoriety made it only too easy to obtain general information about them. Feng Xiao had known everything about the Cui clan's makeup long before they'd arrived. If the family had any deeply buried secrets, they weren't the kind young girls like Cui-jiuniang would know.

Cui Buqu walked into the courtyard to find Feng Xiao and Cui-jiuniang chatting and laughing like old friends. The young lady greeted him with a smile. “Feng-gongzi, you’re awake. There’s breakfast in the front hall; go on and eat. When you’re ready, we’ll enter the city, and I’ll take you to my grandfather.”

“Your grandfather must be a busy man,” Cui Buqu muttered. “I fear he won’t have time to meet us. Why don’t we just leave it be? We’ll have a chance to meet him on the day of the festival.”

Suspecting this young scholar was simply nervous, Cui-jiuniang reassured him. “My grandfather is friendly and approachable. He’s very kind, so please don’t worry. And he loves talking to young people. He won’t make things difficult for you, I promise.”

Cui Buqu smiled faintly at her. “I can see how you idolize your grandfather. He must be a great man.”

Though Cui-jiuniang was none the wiser, Feng Xiao noticed the hint of mockery in Cui Buqu’s eyes. His words weren’t praise, but sarcasm.

“In that case, we’ll go find breakfast, Jiuniang,” said Feng Xiao, smiling brightly. “We’ll come and find you later.”

While the girl was mesmerized, he took the chance to take Cui Buqu’s sleeve and pull him away. Feng Xiao marched him all the way to the front hall before he slowed down and smiled. “You hate them that much, yet you were willing to come here with me. Oh A-Qu, I’m so moved.”

Cui Buqu rolled his eyes. “Deputy Chief Feng has quite the imagination.”

“Jiuniang grew up in the lap of luxury, pampered and loved. Yet you left home at a young age and suffered untold hardships, ruining your health. If I were you, I’d hate them too. But Cui-jiuniang is no fool. If you keep up your jibes, she’ll notice eventually. I presume you didn’t come here to tell her you’re her blood relative?”

Cui Buqu’s steps slowed. Feng Xiao chuckled.

“I wasn’t sure before, but now I see I’m right.”

“Deputy Chief Feng,” said Cui Buqu. “Have you nothing better to do?”

“Cui Buqu, everything about you is a mystery. To personally solve each of them, one by one… Wouldn’t that be greatly entertaining?”

“You made two mistakes,” said Cui Buqu coldly. “I didn’t endure hardships and become ill because I left the Cui family. It was because I was ill and had no way to live that I left them. Secondly, hatred springs from love. I don’t hate the Cui family; they are strangers to me. You cannot threaten me with my past. Just let me help you find Yuyin, and forget about the rest!”

He stalked off, paying no more heed to Feng Xiao, who was left with the sight of his retreating back and the sound of suppressed coughing.

Feng Xiao pursed his lips and leapt into the air. When he landed, there was a bird clutched in his hand—an innocent sparrow that had the misfortune to fly overhead. “How many times must I tell you before you understand?” he groused at the sparrow. “I’ve no interest in Yuyin! You thrash about, you close your eyes and ears, and you’re too clever by half!”

He tapped the sparrow’s fluffy head several times. Vexed, the bird chirped loudly and pecked at his fingers. He relaxed his hand, and the plump bird sprang from his clutches and soared into the sky, terrified it’d be caught again.

Feng Xiao smiled. If it’d been Cui Buqu he held, he wouldn’t have been like that sparrow, so desperate to escape. He wasn’t a helpless sparrow, nor was he an ailing eagle. None of this world’s mediocre lifeforms were a fit comparison. He was no fragile flower growing in the protective shade of a great tree, dependent on his family’s status and reputation. He was Cui Buqu, the only one of his kind in the world. A man capable of carving a path to heaven even when pushed to the edge of a cliff.

“Ah well, no matter. You’re Cui Buqu, after all.” Feng Xiao patted off his hands and flicked the dust from his sleeves, then headed into the front hall. It was late in the morning by now; there wasn’t much breakfast left. Almost everyone preparing to enter the city had already set out. The two Zuoyue guards had also already finished their meal and were waiting outside.

Cui Buqu sat alone at a table, slowly chewing a steamed bun. In front of him were two bowls. Both were filled with congee. There was quite a bit less congee in the second bowl, but still, it wasn’t empty.

Once again, Feng Xiao found his mood had inexplicably lifted.

# Chapter 99

CUI BUQU was halfway through his bowl of congee when someone picked up the second bowl and took a few sips.

“I got that for myself.” Cui Buqu said. He didn’t reach out to grab the bowl; that wasn’t his style.

“With your appetite, one bowl is more than enough,” said Feng Xiao. “Why take a second?”

“That’s all the congee left in the inn. I let them serve me whatever they had.”

“Daoist Master Cui is the kind of person who’d rather throw away uneaten food than leave it out for me to see. If you left it out, doesn’t that mean you wanted me to see it?”

“I already ate from that bowl.”

Feng Xiao’s hand froze. But after a moment, he continued eating as if nothing had happened.

Cui Buqu looked at him askance. It was hard to believe that, for once, the fastidious Feng-er wasn’t complaining.

Swallowing the congee in one gulp, Feng Xiao flashed him a smile. “If you’d really drunk from this bowl, there’d be a mark on the rim. A-Qu, admit it. Is it really so hard to say that you were feeling soft, so you decided to get your companion a bowl of congee?” Before Cui Buqu could retort, he changed the topic: “Before, you said Ning Shewo was heading north. The Jiejian Bureau also received a message that Lin Yong, the young master of Yandang Mountain Estate, recently left home. He’s currently in Donghai Commandery.”

As expected, Cui Buqu set aside their nonsensical bickering and narrowed his eyes. “So it really is in Donghai Commandery.”

Feng Xiao nodded. “Have you had any more news of Ning Shewo’s whereabouts?”

“He arrived in Dongchu Province a few days ago. It’s only a day’s travel from Donghai Commandery. We can presume the two will soon meet.”

Feng Xiao and Lin Yong had shared a fair number of chance encounters. While Cui Buqu had been concealing his identity in Liugong City, Feng Xiao had taken Cui Buqu for an accomplice to the Khotanese envoy’s murder and detained him. During the Linlang Pavilion auction, Cui Buqu had seen Lin Yong’s infatuation with Feng Xiao for himself; the jealous young man had treated Cui Buqu with open hostility.

As for Donghai Commandery, its significance was related to the verses they’d found on Duan Qihu’s corpse in Qiemo. The excerpts had at first seemed random, and Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao had spent an afternoon agonizing over them before managing to tease out two place names: Donghai Commandery and Mount Jieshi. But at that time, they’d been unable to narrow it down any further.

Fanning himself, Feng Xiao said, “Mount Jieshi lies in Feiru County, which falls under the jurisdiction of Beiping Commandery. I sent men to both Beiping and Donghai, and they found something interesting.” He looked expectantly at Cui Buqu.

“In Tan County near the East Sea, there’s a mountain and a pavilion,” Cui Buqu said. “The mountain represents ‘the mountains of returning,’ while the pavilion at its foot represents ‘the pavilion of love.’ This fits perfectly with the last verse of those poetry excerpts: ‘To your side I will return if safe; if dead, my love will never fade.’”

Feng Xiao shrugged. “So you realized it too. It seems there was no need for me to say anything.”

“Southern Jinhuan and northern Yandang,” Cui Buqu muttered in thought. “The leaders of Jinhuan Guild and Yandang Mountain Estate aren’t top-ranked martial artists, but one controls canal transportation in the south, and the other is a family of great wealth in the north. If the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai are planning something big, they’ll need money. It isn’t strange that they recruited those two.”

He set down his bowl and continued. “What I do find strange are Ning Shewo and Lin Yong’s motives. Yuxiu wants to help Princess Qianjin. This man has no parents, no worries or fears, and he’s a fugitive with

nowhere to go. Duan Qihu was also a carefree bandit in his early years. It was only later that he retired from robbery and became the mogul who controlled half of Qiemo. He learned to cherish his life and no longer wished to cooperate with the Thirteen Floors—it was this that led to his death. But Ning Shewo and Lin Yong have no reason to join the Thirteen Floors. How did the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai manage to win them over?"

"What's so strange about it? Everyone has a weakness. Some love wealth, some fear death. And Yuxiu, who neither fears death nor loves wealth, is driven by his regard for Princess Qianjin. Though the Jinhuan Guild has great influence in the south, they established themselves with the help of the emperor of Southern Chen. Ning Shewo's adopted son was at Linlang Pavilion's auction purchasing treasures to bribe the emperor's attendants, wasn't he? Clearly, the Jinhuan Guild loves glory, that's motive enough. As for the Lin family—"

Feng Xiao smiled. "You must have investigated Lin Yong, but I don't imagine you know of a certain incident that took place at Yandang Mountain Estate twenty years ago. At the time, Lin Yong's grandfather had two sons, identical twins. Lin Yong's father was the younger brother; his older brother was to inherit the estate. But around twenty years ago, the older brother went missing on his way home. Lin Yong's grandfather sent out search parties; they looked for a long time before finally discovering the brother's body on the banks of a river. He appeared to have drowned—yet how could a martial artist die by drowning? The matter was never resolved, but Lin Yong's father ended up inheriting the villa." He glanced at Cui Buqu, who was lost in thought. "Are you thinking the younger brother killed the older so he could inherit the estate?"

Cui Buqu first shook his head, then nodded. A look of confusion passed over his face. "I remembered something else, that's all. It's nothing to do with this, so I'll mention it later. But based on what you've said, the brothers must have been very close. Surely it was impossible that he would kill his own brother to inherit the estate?"

Feng Xiao nodded. "What's more, both brothers fell in love with the same maiden. The older brother chose to step aside for his younger brother; he even told his father that he didn't care to inherit the estate. The younger brother had no reason to kill him."

“But what if the supposed younger brother is actually the older brother who was said to have died?” asked Cui Buqu slowly. “If the older brother killed the younger, there would have been no one to compete with him for the estate, and the maiden he loved would be his. They were identical twins, so outsiders might not notice the switch. If their mannerisms were similar enough, he might even have been able to deceive his own family.”

For a moment, Feng Xiao was silent. “Why am I sitting here listening to your wild fantasies this early in the morning?”

*Because you drank that bowl of congee*, Cui Buqu thought.

“Why do my lords look so severe?” called the clear voice of a young maiden. Cui-jiuniang had ambled over to remind them that it was time to set off. She was still dressed in green, but in a different style from yesterday’s outfit. Her trim waist had been cinched tighter, and there were green silk ribbons tying up her hair. Like most women, she delighted in dressing up for the one she admired. She felt a burst of joy when Feng Xiao gave her a second look.

“I’ve already sent someone to inform my grandfather. We should arrive at the Cui residence before noon. My grandfather will welcome you with a feast; both you gentlemen can feel right at home,” she rambled, trying to make conversation. Now shy and with no more reason to linger, she followed Doctor Sun out to the front.

“She might be your sibling, but your personalities are nothing alike,” remarked Feng Xiao.

Ignoring him, Cui Buqu climbed into the carriage first. Feng Xiao followed close at his heels, determined to pry something out of him. “You’ve been away for so long. Are you feeling a bit homesick, perhaps? Nervous?”

Cui Buqu sneered. “The Cui family might not be a noble clan from the jianghu, but Cui Yong isn’t as accommodating as the young lady makes out. Don’t think I’ll help you there. If you want Yuyin, Deputy Chief Feng, you’ll have to get it yourself!”

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Feng Xiao soon met Cui Yong, who according to Cui Buqu wasn't accommodating, yet whom Cui-jiuniang had described as friendly.

His hair and beard were white. He wasn't a tall man, but his eyes were bright and razor-sharp, distinguishing him from most men his age. When greeting Cui-jiuniang and Doctor Sun, his voice and manner were gentle, like any ordinary man who had missed his granddaughter and old friend. But the moment he looked at his two new guests, his gaze turned keen and probing.

"Of the three branches of Hedong's Pei clan, tell me, which is Pei-gongzi from?" Cui Yong asked.

Pei, too, was a prominent surname. Since the Qin and Han dynasties, there had been many changes, and branches of the Pei clan had been established in Hedong and Yanjing. These two branches shared a common ancestor and were no less impressive than the Cui clan.

Feng Xiao smiled. "I'm from neither. My ancestors were ordinary people without names. But back in the day, my grandfather managed to secure a temporary post as an official. I was the only son in my generation, so I'm a bit more willful, that's all."

Cui Yong nodded, indifferent. In truth, his interest wasn't in Feng Xiao: ever since the two of them entered, his gaze had darted toward Cui Buqu again and again, his expression inscrutable. "And Feng-gongzi?" he asked.

"About the same as Pei-xiong," said Cui Buqu coolly.

Cui Yong looked thoughtful. "I wonder where Feng-gongzi's ancestral home is?" Without waiting for an answer, he smiled. "Don't misunderstand. I only ask because you look like an old friend of mine."

The corners of Cui Buqu's mouth curved up, but the smile failed to reach his eyes. "I have no father or mother; they've both passed away."

"You have no other relatives?" Cui Yong was taken aback.

"None," said Cui Buqu.

He would have asked more if not for Doctor Sun's timely intervention. "Your Grace, I'm an old man. I can't stand for too long. Our

friends are new here; you'll scare them if you interrogate them like this. Better to let them settle in first, then you can all talk at leisure."

Though Doctor Sun was employed by one of the Cui family's pharmacies, he'd known Cui Yong for decades and had treated him frequently as a patient; it wasn't out of place for him to speak frankly.

Glancing at him, Cui Yong clapped a hand to his forehead and smiled. "How rude of me. The two of you have come at just the right time. Tomorrow, we're hosting a literary festival with the theme of pomegranate flowers. Since you're also lovers of brush and ink, you must come and enjoy the excitement."

Feng Xiao had restrained his usual unbridled manner, replacing it with an air of mild pride, as if he were a pretentious greenhorn scholar afraid to set a foot wrong in front of Cui Yong. "We traveled here for that exact purpose. I also hear the newly appointed Governor Yuan will be in attendance."

Cui Yong watched him knowingly. It wasn't unusual for a young man to want to distinguish himself before a new commandery governor in the hopes of climbing the ranks. He stroked his beard and smiled. "That's right. However, this year's festival will have more attendees than ever before. It will be a gathering of outstanding talent. Winning first prize won't be easy, even for a bright young man like yourself."

Feng Xiao met his eyes. "A person can only stand out among a crowd. Talent has nothing to do with age. Even if all the world's talents were present, I'd still have the courage to meet them in battle!"

The corner of Cui Yong's mouth twitched. *What a preening idiot.* But he maintained his smile as he exclaimed, "Well said! That's the ambition a young man should have!"

He'd noticed Cui-niangzi's too-frequent glances at Feng Xiao, and of course knew what she was thinking. The girl was obviously enamored with his good looks, but this Pei Jingzhe was arrogant and lacked humility, without even the saving grace of a prestigious family. He wasn't a good match for Jiuniang at all.

Cui Yong mentally crossed out Feng Xiao's name. He drew a breath to instruct his servants to prepare the two guest rooms furthest from

Jiuniang's when a racket broke out on the other side of the door.

The arguing voices of a man and woman drew nearer. Before Cui Yong could drop his smile and put a stop to it, the couple had barged into the room.

"Let go of me!" The woman struggled desperately to free her wrist from the man's grip.

The man's face was dark with rage. "Father! I want a divorce!"

The woman stopped struggling and began screeching. "How dare you!"

"Why wouldn't I dare!" the man sneered.

"Shut up!" Cui Yong snarled, slamming his hands down on the desk. The pair finally fell silent, no longer daring to yell and scream. Sullen anger lined both their faces.

"We have guests present. How could you behave so deplorably?! Get out, both of you. We'll discuss your problems later!" Cui Yong's gaze was icy. It seemed he was no stranger to his son and daughter-in-law's disputes.

The woman knelt before him. "Father! This accursed Cui Lin dared break the family's rules! He's keeping a mistress in the city and saying he wishes for a divorce. Please give me justice!"

Cui Lin scoffed. "She's a kind-hearted woman, yet you took her for a family servant to abuse as you please! My ultimatum stands. If you touch a single strand of hair on her head, I'll have you punished to the full extent of the law. Even the gods of the immortal realm of Daluo Mountain won't be able to save you then!"

"Get the hell *out*!" Cui Yong roared.

With this, Feng Xiao had seen enough to infer this couple's identities. The man had to be Cui Lin, the least accomplished of Cui Yong's four sons. He was the youngest legitimate child, said to have been handsome from birth. His parents loved him to the point of spoiling him, and as a result, he had reached middle age having achieved absolutely nothing. Even handling his own family affairs was beyond his capabilities; his father had to mediate for him.

It was difficult to imagine someone so unexceptional could possibly be Cui Buqu's father.

Tears welled up in Cui-jiuniang's eyes as she watched her parents argue in front of their guests. It was horribly embarrassing, even more so because she'd taken a liking to one of them.

Feng Xiao was still watching the show when he heard Cui Buqu speak up. "Duke Cui, please don't mind us. We'll take our leave."

Cui Yong forced a smile. "Jiuniang, have someone take the two gentlemen to their rooms and see Doctor Sun out."

Cui-jiuniang quickly assented. Head down, she led Doctor Sun and the others away, afraid to even look at Feng Xiao as she did. But as Cui Buqu turned to leave with them, he was stopped by Cui Lin.

"Wait." Cui Lin took a few steps toward him, a queer expression coming over his face. "Who are you?" He reached out to grab Cui Buqu, as if to pull him in for a closer look.

He was blocked by a fan.

Feng Xiao smiled thinly. "Please have some self-respect."

Cui Lin ignored Feng Xiao, his eyes never leaving Cui Buqu. "You look…familiar."

The ghost of a smile crept over Cui Buqu's face. "Surely I look like many people."

Cui Lin looked a bit awkward but persisted in saying, "You really do look like…"

"Sanlang!" Cui Yong said sharply. Cui Lin pressed his lips shut.

Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu left side by side. The faint sounds of Cui Yong scolding his son and daughter-in-law followed them through the door.

"The Cui clan is a prestigious family, yet it seems petty infighting is unavoidable even within this lofty manor!" Feng Xiao shook open his fan and waved it with a sigh. "A-Qu, it's really so fortunate you didn't grow up here. Just think, you might have ended up like Cui Lin. It'd be better to bash your head against a wall and die!"

“The Cui clan isn’t without remarkable individuals,” said Cui Buqu. “The fourth son, Cui Pei, was born out of wedlock, but he’s been brilliant his entire life and is famed for his poetry. The remaining two sons are thoroughly mediocre, but neither of them is as much of a bastard as Cui Lin.”

His tone was bland; it certainly didn’t sound like he was talking about his own father. Feng Xiao began to wonder if he’d speculated wrongly.

Designating a man a hero based on the circumstances of his birth was a foolish thing to do. Throughout history, great men had never been held back by their origins. Feng Xiao didn’t believe knowing his opponent’s background would confer any advantage. Despite this, his curiosity about Cui Buqu was increasing by the day—not the curiosity one might hold toward an opponent, but a genuine interest in the man himself.

He hadn’t yet delved into his own thoughts deeply enough to realize the incongruity there.

A garden was laid out next to the Cui manor, intended specifically for entertaining guests. Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao were brought to two side rooms near the rockery, and on pushing open the door, they found a winding path and a small pond. The Cui clan had assigned two beautiful maids to personally attend them. Everything had been thoughtfully arranged for their comfort, and even Deputy Chief Feng, a man accustomed to luxury, was completely satisfied.

Cui Buqu couldn’t resist mocking him. “Cui Yong is hoping you’ll be seduced by the maids, and Cui-jiuniang will see how shallow a man she’s set her sights on. Alas, Cui Yong could never imagine how unworthy you deem the rest of us. The only one you’d jump to marry is your own reflection!”

Feng Xiao chuckled. “Ququ, have you noticed you’re especially cutting when you’re unhappy?”

“No,” Cui Buqu said expressionlessly.

Feng Xiao patted his shoulder. “It’s very cute. Keep it up!”

Cui Buqu looked at him like he was an idiot.

Suddenly Feng Xiao leaned in. Cui Buqu frowned, flinching back, but a quick hand on his wrist stopped him and dragged him forward. Feng Xiao's expression was warm and intimate, as if he was about to share a secret. "There's plenty of baggage between you and the Cui family. Even if you act like they're strangers, they make you uneasy. Yet you still came with me to find Yuyin. Are you really doing it for my sake?"

Cui Buqu was silent a moment, then slowly said, "The Zuoyue Bureau has discovered that Cui Yong's eldest son, who manages their finances and most of their shops, has been exchanging private messages with Southern Chen's Linchuan Academy. He's been secretly providing them with financial aid. In the last year, at least a thousand silver taels' worth of food and grain has flowed from the Cui family's stores down to the south via the Jinhuan Guild."

The Jiejian Bureau, the Zuoyue Bureau. The first collected intelligence within the courts of foreign nations. The second kept their eyes on the tangle of interactions within the jianghu. Though their scope of interest might occasionally overlap, their duties had been clearly delineated from the day of their establishment. That the Zuoyue Bureau had obtained leads from Linchuan Academy that were unknown to the Jiejian Bureau didn't surprise Feng Xiao.

"And here I thought you'd learned the pleasure of leisure. You came to handle yet another case."

"It's not just the case," Cui Buqu said breezily. "I meant it when I said I don't hate the Cui family. But I never claimed I don't hate Cui Yong and Cui Lin." The hint of a smile played around his lips. "I came to watch a centuries-old branch of the Cui clan collapse overnight."

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The explosive argument Cui Lin had with his wife in front of his father had yet to be resolved. His father had given them both a tongue-lashing, leaving Cui Lin frustrated and unsatisfied. The more he thought about it, the glummer he became. He was too down even to visit his

mistress; he left his quarters and wandered at random until his feet took him to Dingshi Garden where the guests resided.

The events of twenty years ago were little more than a distant memory, but Cui Buqu's arrival had stirred his recollections. This man wasn't a Cui, but his eyes were so familiar. Cui Lin couldn't shake his disquiet.

Twenty years ago, he'd made the biggest mistake of his life. It was a secret he wanted to keep buried, one that should never see the light of day. It was also the reason he was still chained at Cui Yong's side, forbidden from taking a single step out of Boling Commandery.

Within Boling Commandery, the Cui family's word carried more weight even than that of the county magistrate. Cui Yong refused to let Cui Lin leave, and Cui Lin lacked the courage to defy his father. This interdiction had extinguished all his youthful ambitions. What was left for him here beyond indulging in women?

Cui Lin fumed with indignance. He recalled Cui Buqu's face again. Not only did they have the same eyes, they had the same cold and indifferent gaze. It was only that Cui Buqu was less beautiful and thus less eye-catching. Anxiety and curiosity burned in Cui Lin's heart. The flames licked higher and higher, and he yearned to release the pressure. He thought, then thought again. Eventually, he couldn't bear it: He had to see Cui Buqu. It was the only way he could put his mind at ease.

When he arrived outside Cui Buqu's guest room, he saw Cui Buqu's maid step out with a water basin. She was murmuring to herself, a look of puzzlement on her face.

"Bai Yu." Cui Lin called. "Is that Feng-gongzi's room?"

The maid bowed hastily. "Feng-gongzi and Pei-gongzi went out."

Cui Lin frowned. "At such a late hour?"

She hesitated. "Feng-gongzi gave this maid a new name. She is no longer Bai Yu."

"He's just a passing stranger," Cui Lin said with displeasure. "How dare he change your name?"

“Feng-gongzi said it’s an excellent name,” said the maid, “and the lords of the Cui family would surely like it. But this maid found it strange. It’s…it’s Yu Mo.”

“With what characters?” said Cui Lin impatiently. *“Fish Ink?”*

“Feng-gongzi said it’s Yu as in *surplus*. Mo as in *jasmine*.”

*Yu Mo, Yu Mo.* The name seemed to echo in his ears. Cui Lin’s eyes went wide, as if he’d seen a ghost.

*Yu Mo!*

# Chapter 100

IT WAS AS IF an old and dust-rimed book had toppled from a bookshelf to lie open in front of Cui Lin. He was caught completely off-guard. Those memories of Yu Mo were unspeakable, but more than that: They were shameful. And the shame wasn't just his own, but that of the entire Cui family. He'd been young and reckless; he had made a mistake—it was a dark time he never wanted to remember.

Thunder rolled overhead.

Trembling all over, Cui Lin looked up. The sky beyond the eaves flashed bright as noon before going dark again. At some point, heavy clouds had drifted in, completely concealing the new-risen moon that'd been peeking brightly through the willow branches and bathing the garden in gloom. A storm was approaching.

Cui Lin's mind was in chaos. First he saw Yu Mo's face before him, then Cui Buqu's: smudged, jumbled, unclear.

"Sanlang, Sanlang!" the maid shouted beside him. He came back to himself and stared at her dazedly. Bai Yu looked at him in fright. How had a mere change of name elicited such a reaction?

The wind blew colder than before, and Cui Lin stumbled back.

"My lord, your complexion is dreadful. Do you wish to call for a doctor? Or should this maid summon the mistress?"

These words finally penetrated his sluggish mind. "Yes—we must tell Father! We must tell him at once!" He shoved Bai Yu away and stumbled off, back toward the main manor.

The first drops of rain had begun to patter down, but Cui Lin didn't feel the cold. His feet pounded faster and faster as he tore through the night, back soaked with sweat, his face full of naked fear.

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Cui Buqu also didn’t feel the cold. He was standing on a small hill outside Anping. In front of him was a lonely grave marker.

They had traveled a short way east of the city to find this cemetery, where members of the Cui family were laid to rest. Feng Xiao looked at the gravestone.

*Grave of Lady Yu.*

No foreword, no epitaph. Passersby could only guess that the grave belonged to a woman. They wouldn’t know whom she’d married or what she’d done, nor the name of the person who’d erected the marker, let alone her relationship to the Cui family.

“It must be a very long story,” said Feng Xiao.

He’d heard countless such tales before. Anyone who managed to make a name for themselves in the jianghu had experienced challenges; their pasts were often both glorious and tortuous. Feng Xiao was a lone exception. He’d been a child blessed by the heavens, and his entire life had been smooth sailing. He had little interest in hearing others’ stories. Listen as he might, it remained someone else’s life, someone else’s concerns. Whether he reacted with sympathy or anger, it didn’t matter. So why bother?

But right now, he badly wanted to hear Lady Yu’s story. Because this was a story involving Cui Buqu.

“Around thirty years ago, or perhaps even longer, there was a family named Yu. The patriarch was both a farmer and scholar, and he had only one child, a daughter. People called her Mo-niang. By the time I was old enough to remember, she had already passed away. Judging from her portraits, she must have been a beauty.”

The sky had grown dark. The only source of light was a lantern Feng Xiao had placed on the ground before the grave. Its gentle light haloed both men in a hazy glow, barely visible in the drizzling rain.

It was as if time was slipping backward.

Yu Mo hadn’t merely been beautiful. She’d possessed a character people associated with sentiments like “as purehearted as an orchid,” and “as full of virtues as an armful of gems.”

Her father, Patriarch Yu, was a local scholar. Though he held no official position, he'd penned a large assortment of poems and essays. Many came to pay their respects, hoping to become his pupil. He accepted only one, a young man named Yuan Xing. He was Yu Mo's shixiong, and her childhood sweetheart.

By and by, Yu Mo grew into a lovely young woman, and Patriarch Yu hoped to marry her to his disciple. But Yuan Xing wished to travel and study. He left and never returned.

One day, Yu Mo had traveled far afield to visit her extended family. On the way home, she was caught in a sudden downpour. The river swelled, and the currents were swift. Yu Mo and her maid were separated from her family as they tried to cross the river. As they stood on the riverbank, growing increasingly panicked, a son of the Cui family came along. He'd come out to have some fun, but when he saw her stranded beside the river, he volunteered his help. He swam two round trips, carrying both Yu Mo and her maid to the opposite bank. The young lady was deeply grateful. She asked for his name so her father might find him and thank him later. The man introduced himself as Cui Hui. He claimed he was the second son of the main wife of the Boling Cui family.

"He lied?" asked Feng Xiao.

Cui Buqu nodded. "He lied. He was actually Cui Lin, the third son. He was a mischievous youth who often played truant, and was afraid his elders would scold him when he returned home. Thus he gave his second brother's name. In the days that followed, the Yu family sent someone to express their gratitude to the Cui family. Cui Hui happened to be of marrying age, and the Cui family had been searching for a bride. They found Lady Yu's beauty and reputation more than satisfactory, and arranged the wedding.

"Had the river-crossing incident never happened, it would have been a simple story of romance between a man and a woman of similar backgrounds. But that beautiful tale was the finishing touch, turning their union into a match made in heaven."

Feng Xiao was silent a moment. "So was this a tragedy of mistaken identity, forcing two lovers to part?"

Cui Buqu smiled. “No. There was a misunderstanding, but it wasn’t a tragedy. The moment Lady Yu crossed the threshold, she realized the person who’d carried her over the river was actually Cui-sanlang, the third brother. But that hasty first meeting hadn’t been a case of love at first sight. It was Lady Yu and Cui-erlang who shared similar interests, and their relationship was a harmonious one. They both enjoyed watching the snow in winter and viewing the flowers in spring. They discussed poetry, and they hiked together through the countryside. Soon enough, everyone saw them as a perfect match.”

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The rain showed with no sign of stopping. Cui Lin didn’t bother with an umbrella; he ran the entire way through the downpour. Lightning forked overhead, illuminating a face that was paler than the sky itself.

The guest hall of the Cui manor was bustling with excited activity. On Cui Yong’s face was a joy that had been completely absent when he’d censured Cui Lin and his wife earlier that day. The most promising son of the Cui family—Cui Pei, the fourth son Cui-silang—had returned.

“So you’ve finally decided to come home! I’d begun to think you’d forgotten us!” His tone was chiding, but it was obvious he wasn’t the least bit upset.

Cui Pei smiled back at him. “I was heading south to visit some old friends. When I passed near Boling, I heard the Cui family’s literary festival was soon to begin, so I came home.”

Cui Yong huffed and glared at him. “So if not for the festival, you wouldn’t have come back?”

“Of course I would!” Cui Pei laughed. “Father is here, and all his sons and daughters are present. Aren’t I here now?”

With his beloved son before him, Cui Yong was momentarily happy. But his smile soon faded. “After Lady Yuan passed away, you refused to remarry and insisted on traveling the world. I know you didn’t truly wish to come home.”

“Father…” Cui Pei began.

Cui Yong waved a hand. “No need to say more; it’s a good thing that you’re back. You can stay for two or three months, can’t you?”

Looking at his father’s old face, his white hair and beard, Cui Pei couldn’t muster any words of rejection.

Rapid footsteps sounded outside, and Cui Lin burst into the hall.

He was a wretched sight, panting and soaked with his hair plastered to his face. Before Cui Yong could glower in anger, Cui Lin cried out, “He didn’t die! He’s back!”

“Sanlang!” Cui Yong shouted, “What madness is this?! Can’t you see your brother is back?!”

Cui Lin continued to shout as if he hadn’t heard him. “He’s…he’s that Feng Xiao! Do you know what name he just gave Bai Yu? Yu Mo! Lady Yu! Don’t you remember her?!”

Cui Yong and Cui Pei both paled in shock. It was rare for Cui Yong to lose his composure. He braced his hands on the desk to stand, but his legs gave out under him; he slumped back down again. “Could you have heard wrong?” he demanded.

Cui Lin shook his head desperately. “No! I asked Bai Yu several times. She said the man named Feng told her the characters. Yu as in *surplus*! Mo as in *jasmine*!”

After a fraught silence, Cui Yong turned to look at Cui Pei. “That year. You were the one who brought the news he was dead.”

Cui Pei’s smile was pained. “Back then… I went to Doctor Sun, ready to implore the doctor to do everything he could to save the child. But by the time I arrived, Doctor Sun told me he was beyond saving—he’d stopped breathing. Before dying, the child had apparently begged Doctor Sun to dig him a grave. He thought that since the Cui family had never recognized him, they wouldn’t allow him to be buried in the ancestral cemetery. If he was going to be buried as an afterthought, why not just dig a grave for him right there, far from his home? That way, he wouldn’t be a burden to anyone. In a moment of weakness, Doctor Sun agreed. I saw the child’s grave myself; I was the one who erected the marker.”

“But who else would know about Yu Mo?!” Cui Lin insisted. “She was the only child of the Yu family. Feng Xiao must be an alias!”

“What are you panicking for?!” Cui Yong asked, furious. “If that child lives, he’s your own son. Are you afraid he’s returned to exact revenge?!”

Cui Lin’s face was ashen. He stood there dumbfounded.

Cui Yong drew in a deep breath. “His surname is Feng. The Yu family has no relatives with that name, and there are no Fengs in Boling. However, Lady Yu had a shixiong. Could it be him?” He looked to Cui Pei, as if seeking guidance.

Looking back at his usually decisive father, Cui Pei felt for the first time that his father had aged. Sighing inwardly, he said the words Cui Yong least wanted to hear: “I haven’t yet seen the young man in question. But if he really is that child, he must bear some resemblance to Sanlang and Lady Yu.”

Cui Lin’s face was drained of color. Cui Yong’s lips had thinned; for a long time, he said nothing.

But Cui Pei understood. “Then he does resemble them? A name can be faked; it doesn’t prove anything. Whoever he is, he knows about Yu Mo, and deliberately revealed it to San-ge; he must know what happened. Father, please summon him back!” He sighed. “If we’re going to apologize and admit our wrongdoings, we need to tell him clearly.”

“Father…” Cui Lin’s voice wavered. “I don’t want to see him. I can’t see him!”

Cui Yong’s beard trembled. “Silang,” he said at last. “Fetch your dage right now. And send someone to find those two. Bring them back at once!”

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The rain fell without cease, running down the face of the crude grave marker like the tears its owner had been unable to shed in life. At some point, the lantern had gone out, extinguished in the drizzle.

No moon or stars shone through the clouds, and though it was early summer, a faint chill clung to the air. They had brought no umbrellas, and Cui Buqu didn't intend to go back for one. He let the rain soak his hair and shoulders. He'd begun the story, so he intended to finish it—a story with a sweet beginning and a bitter end.

"The good times didn't last," he said. "Cui-er fell ill and passed away, leaving Lady Yu widowed and childless. The Cui family didn't ask her to remain bound to Cui-er in death, and the Yu family was heartbroken for their daughter; they wished to bring her home so she might remarry. But Lady Yu refused. She had loved Cui-er deeply, and no one could replace him in her heart; she preferred to live out her days in his family home as his widow. However, back when Cui-er and his wife were wed, when everyone had been exclaiming over the beautiful couple, one person had been silently stewing in envy."

Feng Xiao, sharp as ever, guessed it at once. "Cui-sanlang, Cui Lin."

"Correct."

Cui Lin had admired Lady Yu's beauty and talent. He was furious with himself for using his second brother's name. If he hadn't, all of Cui-er's happiness, as well as the lovely Lady Yu, would have instead been his. Though Cui Lin, too, had married not long after, he and his bride's personalities clashed. He'd grown increasingly resentful, and witnessing the harmonious love between his second brother and his sister-in-law was salt in the wound. But the deed was done. No matter how it agonized him, Lady Yu could never be his.

But then his second brother had passed away, leaving Lady Yu a widow. Lady Yu spent most of the year in the villa where she and her husband had often stayed, writing poetry and painting pictures in remembrance of her late husband. As time went on, Cui-san's dissatisfaction burned a hole in his heart. Finally, he got drunk one day and slipped into the villa. He had his men lure away the people around Lady Yu, and he raped her.

By then, he'd painted a beautiful scenario in his head. Since Lady Yu had refused to remarry and remained in the villa, Cui-san had imagined it would be easy for him to keep her as a mistress and come and go whenever

he pleased. Besides, he'd met her first. It was Cui-er who'd stolen the woman who should have belonged to him.

Feng Xiao raised a brow. "If Cui-san admired Lady Yu so much, why didn't he speak up when the marriage was being arranged in the first place?"

"Because at the time, the Cui family had found him a better match," said Cui Buqu with a sneer on his lips. "The woman in question was the second daughter of the eldest son of the Lu clan of Fanyang. They were of much higher status than the Yu family. This match would be far more advantageous for Cui-san, and thus he made his decision. It was a mistake he regretted for the rest of his life."

Feng Xiao's lip curled. "What a surprise."

Lady Yu had a gentle nature, but that night, she struggled with all her might against Cui-san. Afterward, she resolutely refused to be his mistress and confessed the entire matter to Cui Yong.

Cui Yong had been shocked. He summoned Cui-san and confronted him, then beat him half to death. If not for his wife's pleas, he would have disowned him that day and expelled him from the clan.

In the end, however, it was too horrific a scandal. If word of it spread, not only would the Cui family's century-long reputation crumble, Lady Yu would also suffer censure and shame. She'd be forced to leave the Cui family even if it was against her wishes, and if she did, she would no longer be Cui-er's widow.

In order to meet Cui-er in the afterlife, Lady Yu told Cui Yong she was willing to pretend nothing had happened, so long as she never had to see Cui-san again. Cui Yong agreed. He moved Lady Yu to another villa and sent powerful maidservants to guard her at all times so that she would never have to suffer such indignity again. Cui-san was detained at the Cui manor. He was forbidden from taking a step outside, no different from being placed under house arrest.

But some time later, Lady Yu discovered she was pregnant. The identity of that child hardly needed to be said.

"It was you?"

“Mm,” said Cui Buqu. “It was me.”

He was calm to the point of indifference, as if it was someone else’s story he was recounting. The rain had soaked his clothes, leaving him freezing cold; even his heart was cold. Everything between heaven and earth had become smudged and indistinct—only the soft sound of a sigh beside him was clear as a bell. But how could the carefree Deputy Chief Feng, the man who took nothing to heart, heave such a sigh? Cui Buqu smiled. He must have misheard.

“I still have many questions.” Feng Xiao was no longer fanning himself. It would have been beyond stupid to do so in the wind and rain.

“I know,” said Cui Buqu. “The story is far from over.”

# Chapter 101

LADY YU had been deeply in love with Cui-er, yet death had separated them at a young age. She'd intended to spend the rest of her life remembering her late husband. But the horrific effects of that dark night haunted her, a nightmare that had stretched into reality and left behind a seed of evil.

After realizing she was pregnant, she became restless and wracked with anxiety. Sometimes she felt she'd failed her husband, and wished to rid herself of the child in her womb. At other times, she felt the child growing within her was innocent. Though its father was monstrous, that wasn't the babe's fault.

It was then that bad news found her again, this time from the Yu family. The Yu patriarch had fallen on the road while traveling to visit his daughter at the villa. Though the injury hadn't seemed serious, he took a sudden turn for the worse and fell gravely ill.

When she heard, Lady Yu threw caution to the wind and hastened back to her parents' house. She remained at her father's sickbed, too afraid to tell him what had happened. She feared he'd seek revenge on the Cui family, and that his fury and panic would damage his already fragile health.

But even with the apple of his eye keeping watch at his bedside, Lady Yu's father never recovered. He was an old man and had struck his head when he fell. He passed away not long after. Her mother withstood her grief to make the funeral arrangements, but shortly after, she too fell ill.

The Yu family line had continued via single sons for a number of generations. Now, during Yu Mo's time, the family only had a single daughter. The rest of Yu Mo's relatives lived far away; even if they wanted to help, there was little they could do. Standing up to the Cui family was out of the question. Wary of stressing her sick mother further, Lady Yu continued to hide her pregnancy.

"Most women in her situation would weep and wail, or simply allow themselves to be trampled and submit to the will of her husband's family.

Lady Yu was an ordinary woman; she'd never traveled the jianghu. Yet even after the hardships she'd endured, she remained unbending as steel. She was truly a person to be admired."

Feng Xiao looked up at the sky. The rain had subsided, the drizzle fading into scattered drops. Cui Buqu, however, was already soaked to the skin. Of course, Feng Xiao wasn't much better off. On any other day, he'd likely have frowned and gone back to the manor to wash and change. But tonight, he suppressed the impulse and remained where he was. He could hardly believe it himself.

He didn't urge Cui Buqu to return to the manor. He knew Cui Buqu hadn't come simply to tell him a tale from the past; he was also speaking to the occupant of the grave. Besides, Feng Xiao wanted to know what happened next. Since he'd guessed wrong about the beginning, there had to be more unexpected twists.

"She was strong," said Cui Buqu. "But even for the strongest, things don't always go as they wish."

With the death of her father, Yu Mo lost the family member closest to her. It was this that ultimately pushed her to keep the child. At least then there'd be someone at her side with the same blood running through their veins. But Yu Mo was a widow of the Cui family; it was impossible for her to give birth to this child in secret. She therefore approached Cui Yong and explained.

Cui Yong had thought putting Cui-san under house arrest had resolved the whole sordid matter. Lady Yu's news stunned him beyond words. When he heard she wished to keep the child, he of course objected. If she gave birth to a babe now, everyone would know the child wasn't her late husband's. Cui Yong understood the child would still be a Cui, but an affair between a man and his sister-in-law was an ugly scandal to be buried at all costs.

Lady Yu, however, had prepared her arguments, and they were persuasive. Even if she didn't keep this child, she'd one day have to adopt a son from the clan; this was the only way she could continue Cui-er's legacy. In that case, she might as well give birth to the child in secret and tell everyone she'd adopted them from a distant branch of the Cui clan. He

could then be entered as Cui-er's son in the records. It would be the best of both worlds.

Lady Yu was determined, and her proposal was feasible. After thinking for a long time, Cui Yong agreed. Lady Yu settled down in the new villa, and Cui Yong dispatched trustworthy people to serve her.

But no secret can be kept forever. News of Lady Yu's pregnancy quietly spread. Eventually the gossip reached the ears of Cui-san's wife, Lady Lu.

Lady Lu came from a prestigious family as well, and couldn't possibly tolerate such an insult from her husband. She flew into a rage. If the child's origins should leak, it would bring great shame to the family. As Cui-san's wife, she would be humiliated. She hatched a plan to secretly swap out the medicine Lady Yu was taking for a healthy pregnancy. Yu Mo didn't notice at first, and almost suffered a miscarriage. Though she fortunately realized something was wrong in time to save the child, the drug had damaged her body and the child's natural vitality. The birth was extraordinarily difficult, and she remained bedridden after.

A chill wind blew, and Cui Buqu coughed. "I was sickly as a child and late to speak. My reactions were sluggish, and I enjoyed sitting by myself the entire day, ignoring everyone around me. They thought I was slow in the head or mute."

"Your parentage needed to be hidden, and a sickly child would have a hard time just surviving to adulthood. It was impossible for you to carry on Cui-er's legacy in any meaningful sense. Cui Yong must have regretted his decision."

Cui Buqu smiled. "Correct, he regretted it."

On behalf of this child, the Cui family had gone to great lengths to quash any rumors. They'd invented a distant branch family from whole cloth and had spent endless hours comforting Lady Lu, lest she report the affair to her family and incite conflict between their clans. All this for a child who was weak and sickly from infancy, for whom all their efforts might go to waste.

But if Cui Buqu died in childhood, everything would neatly be squared away, and the Cui family's shame would be no more. Thus Cui

Yong resolved to kill him. Ridding himself of a child was a simple matter; he hardly needed to lift a finger. The only obstacle was Lady Yu.

Though Lady Yu was herself frail, she could sense her child's position was precarious. She kept him with her at all times and taste-tested all his food. As she watched the trusted attendants around her gradually be replaced with new faces, she realized keeping her child safe might not be within her power. She dragged her sickly body out, looking for someone who could help her.

She went not to Cui Yong, nor to the Cui family's eldest son. Instead, she went to the fourth son, Cui Pei, and entrusted him with her fatherless child. She knew she hadn't much longer to live, and she begged him to take care of Cui Buqu. Cui Pei couldn't bear to refuse her. He agreed to her request.

Not long after, Lady Yu joined her late husband in death. Cui Pei was yet unmarried, and he traveled often. Afraid he wouldn't be able to protect the child when he was away, he went to Cui Yong with the young Cui Buqu in his arms and begged his father to spare the child's life out of respect for Lady Yu's dying wish, even if it meant sending him from Boling or concealing his name and identity.

Of his four sons, this illegitimate youngest son was Cui Yong's favorite. Though he thought Cui Pei soft, he heeded his pleading and agreed to spare the child's life, on one condition: He was to be noted down as a servant in the household and would grow up as one. No one was to reveal his true identity.

Years passed, and gradually the storm of these events died down. The younger generation of the Cui family grew up, and though they knew nothing of the incident, all of them knew that the family was raising a Cui as a servant. When the senior members of the clan occasionally mentioned it, their expressions took on a strange cast, and they picked their words with care, as if there were many things they were unable to say. Any curious child who asked questions received a scolding. Over time, they gleaned that the child in question—a boy who lacked even a name—was full of secrets, and that the senior members of the family scorned him too.

Children might be ignorant, but they could be more sensitive than adults believed. These young ones picked up on the feelings of their

seniors, and understood they were free to bully that child to their hearts' content. They gave him various nicknames for their own entertainment, like A-Cao and A-Hua—*grass* and *flower*, or A-Gou and A-Mao—*dog* and *cat*. They threw strange insects at him, mixed incense and mud into his food, and even went so far as to punch and kick him.

Despite his poor health, the child fought to survive. He was unwell almost every day, forcing his ailing body through menial tasks alongside the Cui family servants. He knew there was no point in reporting the bullying. The only person who'd protect him was Cui Pei, but Cui Pei was often away and not always there to shield him. Yet no matter what, he refused to die. Gradually, he learned how to avoid the bullies or fight back. He still found himself targeted at least once a week; it was inevitable.

Cold and fever were his constant companions. King Yama continued to kick back his soul to the land of the living, but his body grew frailer and frailer.

He wasn't even permitted to attend the same classes as the rest of the Cui family but had to hide outside the building at the corner of the wall and listen to the few words he could catch. Ignored and unseen, he used reeds to trace out characters. His fingers silently slid along the sand, writing out the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and *Zuozhuan*.

Whenever Cui Pei returned, it was a good day. Cui Pei would take him to Doctor Sun to recuperate and bring him to the old villa, where he'd pay respects to his deceased mother and speak of her memory. Cui Pei broached the idea of bringing the child with him on the road more than once, but Cui Yong never agreed. Cui Pei couldn't defy his father even for his nephew's sake and besides, the boy was weak; he couldn't endure the strain of long travel.

The other adult members of the Cui family looked upon the boy with pity and contempt. Unlike the children who bullied him outright, they sighed about how brave he was to have survived to the age of nine. He lived, ate, and dressed exactly like the servants of the Cui family. Cui Yong didn't go out of his way to torture him, but he did make a point of avoiding him. The boy could tell Cui Yong was perplexed that, despite all the hardship and illness, he'd managed to live this long.

But the boy wasn’t dull and foolish as they believed—he knew how to protect himself. He calculated his way through crises and threw himself into survival. He was simply too young. The house was his prison; he spun around in circles, stumbling and groping about, all to find a way to survive in this hostile place.

Cui Pei had told him he did have a name. His grandfather had named him Cui Jie, *steps*, ostensibly out of hope that the child would be like the stone stairs beneath his small feet, rising up step by step as he found his way forward. But the child knew full well that wasn’t the real meaning behind Cui Jie—his grandfather had named him after the stone steps trodden on by thousands.

He didn’t need that name. He would rather be A-Mao or A-Gou than Cui Jie.

At the age of nine, he fell more gravely ill than ever before. He lay alone in bed, ignored by all and growing worse by the day. Fortunately, Cui Pei happened to return before he succumbed completely and carried him on his back to Doctor Sun. At the time, the Zhou dynasty had been in power, and Cui Pei had won the emperor’s favor with his outstanding scholarly talent. Cui Pei had to go to the capital to meet the emperor; he couldn’t stay. He temporarily entrusted his nephew to Doctor Sun.

The boy knew then that his opportunity had finally come. He begged Doctor Sun to let him go—he should tell everyone in the Cui family that he’d died and been buried. After all, the Cui family was hoping for his death. The moment he was gone, the enormous stone weighing on the hearts of the family would vanish, and they could breathe a great sigh of relief.

Even at nine, the boy had realized that Cui-san’s wife, Lady Lu, had repeatedly sought to kill him, and that though Cui-san knew, he chose to do nothing. The boy had avoided her attempts a few times, but he couldn’t avoid them forever. Perhaps his grandfather Cui Yong might one day show him a sliver of softness, but Lady Lu and Cui-san would never. He had to leave. Even if he perished out there in the world, at least he’d die beneath the boundless open sky.

Doctor Sun had some knowledge of the boy’s background and couldn’t bear to reject his pleas. In the end, he agreed to keep the boy’s

secret and concocted some pills for his illness that he could take with him. He gave him some travel money and clothes, then took him to a merchant group that was traveling south.

As Cui Buqu continued, Feng Xiao listened in silence. Cui Buqu's telling was plain and straightforward, free of any exaggeration, yet the history he divulged was heart-wrenching.

Feng Xiao had encountered people with lives more wretched than Cui Buqu's, but none of them had survived to adulthood. He'd also encountered people as tenacious as Cui Buqu, but those people—including himself—hadn't experienced even a tenth as much hardship.

*When the heavens wish to bestow great responsibility on someone, they batter his spirit, exhaust his body, starve him, and buffet him with setbacks. All to enhance his capabilities*. Anyone could recite the classics, but how many people could endure to the end? How many people would crumple from exhaustion halfway and give up?

"Doctor Sun pitied you. Why didn't he take you in himself?" Feng Xiao asked.

"The doctor's relatives and friends all live here," said Cui Buqu coolly. "How could he fight the Cui family for my sake? He did his best within the bounds of his fate. That was the greatest kindness he could do me, and I benefited from it."

"So you changed your name to Cui Buqu to signify that you 'won't go' back to the Cui clan ever again?"

Cui Buqu shook his head, then raised a fist to his mouth and coughed softly. "Lady Yu birthed me. She wished me to carry on Cui-er's legacy. I use Cui as my surname in honor of this wish. As for Buqu…they all wanted me dead. They were waiting for me to die." A meaningful smile curved his lips. "But I'm going to live. *Buqu*—I won't go to my death. I'm not going to die. No matter how sick I am, no matter how painful it gets, I *will* continue breathing."

He turned back to the gravestone as Feng Xiao watched from behind. A fire seemed to ignite in Feng Xiao's heart, a heat that was nameless and indescribable. After a moment, he looked away and said, "Where did you go after heading south?"

“I found a place to settle down and live out my life.”

Those had been troubled times, and he’d been a lone child. No matter how mature or circumspect he was, there was a high chance he’d encounter people who meant him ill. Doctor Sun had sent him off with a reliable group of merchants to afford him some measure of safety, but once they’d reached their destination and finished their business, they’d return home. It was impossible for anyone to protect him at all times.

The leader of the merchant group saw he was a bright lad and asked him to stay with the caravan as an extra set of hands. Cui Buqu weighed his options; being alone was dangerous, so he agreed. He followed the merchants and learned how to keep accounts, as well as how to read others’ speech and mannerisms. He learned more words and interacted with more people. But the knowledge didn’t make his body any stronger. As he grew into adolescence, his latent illness increasingly affected him. The merchant leader loved and cherished him greatly. He had no children of his own, and he raised Cui Buqu as an adopted son, going so far as to find a famous physician to treat him.

But such times couldn’t last. The leader accidentally offended a group of thugs called the Qixing Gang. They killed him, and Cui Buqu lost his pillar of support. He wandered alone for many years afterward, adrift, until he met the man who would become his master, Fan Yun.

Cui Buqu was a precocious child. He had an eidetic memory and could recall many events from his childhood, even if some of the details had faded. Many years later, when he took charge of the Zuoyue Bureau, he’d secretly sent men to investigate the merchant leader’s death.

“That Qixing Gang must have met with a tragic end.”

Cui Buqu’s thin lips curved slightly again. “The leader of the Qixing Gang was backed by a demonic sect from the jianghu, the Hehuan Sect. He was sure no one would dare confront them. I merely used a small trick to provoke Linchuan Academy, the largest sect in the south, and turned them against the Qixing Gang. They annihilated them.”

Whoever said those with no martial arts couldn’t survive in the jianghu? Anyone who made an enemy of Cui Buqu would die without knowing what hit them.

“So for all those years, you never intended to leave the Cui family alone. You were just waiting for your opportunity.”

“Cui Yong cares deeply for his reputation. Let him watch as the Cui family crumbles away and he loses all his authority. For him, this will be a fate worse than death. As for Cui-san, he’s been confined to Boling Commandery for years. His wife despises him, and they argue incessantly. He couldn’t stand the loneliness and took a mistress, but his wife found out. There’s no peace in that family. He’s being slowly ground down, and that’s much more painful than dying from a quick stab.”

“Before, you said Cui-dalang, the eldest son, was secretly aiding Linchuan Academy. Was that true?” asked Feng Xiao.

Cui Buqu frowned and coughed. “Of course it’s true. I’d already devised another method of dealing with the Cui family when evidence of Cui-dalang’s crimes turned up. Why waste the opportunity? There’s no need for me to expend effort needlessly.”

Feng Xiao smiled broadly. “Brilliant! I love a good revenge story. Now this is the Cui Buqu I know—when there’s vengeance to be had, he’ll show no mercy.”

Still coughing, Cui Buqu hunched over before the grave.

Feng Xiao found the sight of it unbearable. “All right, story’s over. Lady Yu heard you as well. You’ve returned to avenge her!” He yanked Cui Buqu upright. “Look at you; you’ve got one foot in the grave yourself. I’m afraid if you stand here a moment longer you won’t make it to sunrise, and I have no plans to return to the bureau without enjoying the show!”

He hadn’t pulled hard, but Cui Buqu staggered and almost fell. Feng Xiao caught him, the robe under his fingers so wet one could wring water from it. “If I weren’t here, could you even walk back under your own power?” Feng Xiao pursed his lips, then reluctantly pulled Cui Buqu onto his back.

“If you weren’t here, Qiao Xian or Zhangsun Bodhi would be. There’re also the Zuoyue guards.” Cui Buqu spoke between coughs, but he sounded calm enough. “I imagine the Cui family’s looking everywhere for us. If we go back now, it should at least be interesting.”

“Hah! Can a thousand of your Qiao Xians and Zhangsuns compare to even one of me?” Feng Xiao sneered, complaining with every step he took. “You’re a bag of bones; so pointy! Consider yourself lucky my venerable self deigns to carry you while you’re sopping wet like this. My robe is ruined.”

Since Feng Xiao was carrying him, Cui Buqu didn’t snipe back. He’d spent too long buffeted by the wind and rain and felt groggy. He pressed his forehead to the nape of Feng Xiao’s neck, soaking up his body heat to warm himself, then sighed comfortably. “You’re the lucky one, getting to carry my venerable self.”

“I’ll drop you right now. Don’t believe me?”

“If you do, you won’t be able to enjoy the show.”

They continued in this vein until their figures faded into the distance. Only the solitary gravestone remained, with the dark lantern before it. As the rain ceased, the sky cleared, and the moon showed itself once more, painting the lantern and inscription an icy silver. Green leaves fell from the canopy, dripping frost-colored rainwater that trickled down the stone like a woman’s tearful smile.

# Chapter 102

A SINGLE NAME had dragged the entire Cui family into a maelstrom, and the most terrified among them was Cui-san.

In the intervening years, he'd realized he'd done something utterly shameful. Something to be buried in the dark, something the world would condemn if it came to light. But it was human nature to shy away from one's mistakes, as if by refusing to examine them, one could also avoid the consequences. More than twenty years had passed, and the third son of the Cui family had long pushed Lady Yu's name to the back of his mind. He'd never imagined that one day this name would drag out the past he'd turned away from and unearth those tragic and shameful memories.

He looked to his father. After the initial shock, Cui Yong had swiftly regained his composure. Now he looked inscrutable, once again the calm and dignified patriarch of the Cui clan.

Cui-san's anxiety eased a little. That was right—Lady Yu had been dead for many years, and there was no one left of the Yu family. Supposing that child had lived, what could he do? Lady Yu hadn't been murdered; she'd died of an illness. As for the child, the Cui family hadn't killed him either. Even if he'd survived to grow up and hate his father's family, he couldn't touch them. The Cui clan of Boling was a mighty family with centuries of history who had produced countless generals and scholars of great renown. Their clan was more illustrious than many imperial families of previous dynasties. They wouldn't be toppled so easily.

Cui Pei watched coolly as his third brother's expression went from panic to relief and easily guessed his thoughts. "San-ge, if Feng-gongzi really is that child, how will you face him? Do you plan to make Father clean up your messes yet again?"

Cui-san was startled, then angry. "I've already been punished for what happened. Even now Father keeps me confined to Boling. Is this not enough? I've scarcely seen him since he was born, and I didn't do anything to him! What do you mean, how will I face him?!" He swallowed, feeling his words lacked conviction; guilt pricked him. "He was the one who ran

away. If he hadn’t, the Cui family would be taking care of him to this day! If he’s been alive all these years without sending a single word, then it’s clear he’s a disloyal and unfilial child. He knows nothing about what’s right or proper. If we choose not to pursue the matter, that’s generous enough. Actually, he should be the one to apologize to us!”

Cui Pei laughed in anger. “How can you even speak! If you hadn’t turned a blind eye to your wife laying hands on that child while I was away, he would have stayed. He ran away because he couldn’t endure any more torment! He was only nine years old. Even if Doctor Sun helped him flee, he was left to wander the world alone. What must he have gone through? And it’s all because of you!”

If Cui Buqu hadn’t shown up, perhaps Cui Pei’s resentment would have remained buried. Perhaps he and Cui-san would have remained loving siblings on the surface, as close as hands and feet. Perhaps the Cui family would still have been a harmonious and thriving clan. Cui Pei in this generation and Cui Fei in the next, passing down the clan’s glorious legacy year over year over year. Perhaps sometimes, on Tomb-Sweeping Day, Cui Pei would recall his second sister-in-law and that pitiful child. He’d go to Lady Yu’s grave and offer some incense with a guilty sigh, and that would have been the end of it.

According to all the teachings, family came before the individual. Cui Pei’s father had great authority, and Cui Pei also had to think about his children. He knew he was a coward, that he could never escape the golden shackles of the Cui clan. So he hadn’t confronted Cui-san over his poor sister-in-law and her deceased child. He hadn’t burned everything down, hadn’t exposed all those ugly secrets for the world to see, hadn’t pushed the Cui clan down into a mire of shame. Yet now, a man named Feng-gongzi whom he’d yet to meet had dredged up all this rotten past, and his guilt and shame along with it.

“Shut up, both of you!” Cui Yong roared. “We don’t even know who that Feng person is, and you’ve already started fighting! Don’t you see how ridiculous you’re being?!”

Cui-dalang had rushed over upon receiving the news. Hearing shouts at the door, he entered the room with cupped hands. “Father, please calm

down! Let’s talk. Silang has just returned from a long journey; don’t let this ruin your mood.”

The steward had briefed him on the way here, so his initial shock had faded. “Father, since this person knows Lady Yu’s name, he must have some connection to her, even if he’s not the child. The name he gave—Feng Xiao—rings a bell. Thinking on it now, I remember hearing someone mention that the current emperor established the Jiejian Bureau, and their deputy chief is surnamed Feng.”

Cui Yong frowned. “The Jiejian Bureau?”

“That’s right,” agreed Cui Pei. “I’ve heard of it too. They say the Jiejian Bureau has authority equal to the Six Ministries. They aid the emperor in obtaining foreign intelligence and spying on the Göktürks.”

His eyes were on his father as he spoke; he entirely missed the change in Cui-dalang’s expression.

Cui Yong looked thoughtful. “The emperor doesn’t interfere in his subjects’ private affairs,” he muttered. “Even if Feng Xiao is the head of this Jiejian Bureau and has some connection to Lady Yu, he can’t touch us. What hasn’t the Cui clan survived? The clashes between warlords during the Han dynasty’s wane, the turbulent changes of the two Jin dynasties, even the wars that ravaged the Northern dynasties. We’ve never relied on the support of any one emperor.”

In his words was a hint of pride. Everyone else nodded, convinced. The small shred of guilt in Cui-san’s heart had long flown away, and as for Cui-dalang, he’d never been troubled by guilt at all. “Father,” he said. “If he doesn’t mention Lady Yu directly, we can just feign ignorance. There’s no reason we should bring it up ourselves.”

Cui Yong also felt he’d overreacted. Wasn’t ordering a panicked search for someone over a single name essentially an admission of guilt?

Cui Pei sighed quietly. He raised his head and looked outside the hall. At the far end of the courtyard stood an ancient tree, older than him and Cui-san combined. Yet even that tree was younger than the genealogy of the Cui family. All aristocratic families had their pride. Cui Yong had said it—even the emperor himself was nothing to fear. What was a mere Feng Xiao?

But if Feng Xiao really was the head of the Jiejian Bureau—if he'd deliberately used Lady Yu's name to draw their attention—would it really be so easy to get rid of him?

Cui Yong was fixated on the glory of the past. He refused to look ahead. Cui Pei had traveled far and wide, and his experience was vast. Yet in this house, his father's word was law. He could only sigh to himself. Indeed, his father had grown old.

A servant soon came to report that both guests had returned. Despite the rain, they hadn't taken any umbrellas. They were drenched to the skin and planned to wash and change before coming to see their host.

Cui Yong nodded. He didn't sit idle but ordered the kitchen to prepare a late repast. It was rare that all his sons were reunited, so they sat and drank together. By the time Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu arrived, the food was ready.

When Cui Buqu stepped into the inner hall, all eyes turned to him. He ignored the stares and smiled without reservation. "Your Grace has summoned us so late at night. Is there anything the matter?"

Cui Pei scrutinized him but couldn't see the frail and reticent child he remembered in the self-possessed young man before him now.

Cui Yong had by now recovered his composure. He smiled. "Nothing at all. You're not locals, and the streets are treacherous from the rain. I feared you might get lost, so I sent someone to look for you. If you haven't taken your supper, I'll have someone deliver it to you later."

A trace of regret surfaced on Cui Buqu's features. "I must be honest, it's true I haven't been here in many years. I almost don't recognize my hometown, but the lush mountains and clear waters are unchanged. I returned not just for the literary festival, but also to pay my respects to my late mother."

This proclamation was greeted by ringing silence. No one had expected Cui Buqu to be this direct.

Cui Pei was on his feet at once, emotion clear on his face. Cui-san and Cui Yong had realized Cui Buqu looked familiar. Of course Cui Pei now saw it too. Those eyes, that chin—they were the spitting image of his sister-in-law's.

“You. Who is your mother?” he asked softly, keeping a tight rein on his rampaging emotions.

“Haven’t you already guessed?” Cui Buqu smiled.

This smile, Feng Xiao thought, was different from usual. Or rather, it was different from the smiles he customarily directed at Feng Xiao.

Cui Buqu didn’t smile often. When he did, they were sneering or sarcastic, the smirk of a fox who’d successfully netted his prey. His reactions were tightly controlled; he kept his glee hidden in the depths of his gaze. Sometimes, when he bested Feng Xiao in a game of wits or won the upper hand, the corners of his mouth would curl and his eyes would narrow in satisfaction, softening the coldness of his brow.

But he’d never looked at Feng Xiao like this, an expression that had the shape of a smile, yet was not. Bloodlust lurked in the curve of his lips, and it was difficult to discern whether what he felt was pleasure or something else entirely.

Feng Xiao felt like the hunter who’d caught the fox by the tail. Inordinately pleased, he pulled his folding fan from his sleeve. No one noticed him fanning himself despite the cold and rainy night. All their focus was on Cui Buqu.

“You ran into Jiuniang while passing through the area,” said Cui Yong in a low voice. “I recognized your talent, and that you were both promising young minds, and invited you to stay. If you have any complaints about your reception, then speak. There’s no need for these cryptic remarks!”

Cui Buqu gave another small smile. “All these years, and Your Grace hasn’t changed a bit. You dance around the topic, pretending you’re strict but fair, when you’re so obviously looking out for your own interests. Your son ruined my mother and fathered a bastard on her, then tolerated his wife’s brazen attempts to murder her. Yet you swept it all under the rug to protect the reputation of the Cui family. If I were truly dead, who would seek justice for Lady Yu?”

The words *seek justice* made Cui Yong’s heart thump. He slammed his hands on the table and rose. “So you *are* Cui Jie! You were a child then; what do you know of what happened? The Cui family raised you, yet you

ran off in the night and never sent word all these years. Now you've returned to curse your own kin and elders, repaying our kindness with malice!"

"That's right, A-Jie," said Cui-dalang. "In the years you were gone, we missed you terribly. After Doctor Sun said you died, Father was so heartbroken he wept. Now that we see you're alive, of course we're over the moon with happiness. What happened with your mother back then was complicated. Why don't you take a seat? Let's discuss this properly and not make fools of ourselves in front of outsiders."

Feng Xiao had to smother his laughter. This mixture of kindliness and threat might have worked on an ordinary man. If Lady Yu's son were less outstanding, it would have been impossible for him to confront the entire family on his own. Perhaps he'd be dissatisfied with their response, but ultimately he'd be forced to admit defeat.

But Cui Buqu was no ordinary man.

He whipped up storms wherever he went, throwing the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai into chaos and dealing them setback after setback. Even the pampered and arrogant Prince of Jin sought to win him over. To Cui Buqu, Cui Yong's words were no more than laughable posturing.

Feng Xiao would have bet Pei Jingzhe's head that right now, Cui Buqu was a cat toying with a mouse, in no rush to start his offensive. He was simply watching the scene play out, waiting for them to grow more desperate and panicked.

Sure enough, Cui Buqu smiled again. "Though it's true I was young and spoke little, there is much I remember quite clearly. For example, how Lady Lu ordered the Cui family servants to poison my food. Unfortunately, I was tough to kill and alert to their schemes. For three days I refused to eat until the county magistrate came to visit Your Grace and I fainted from hunger in front of him, obligating Your Grace to look into the matter. Looking back, it's true that despite my origins, the Cui family didn't kill me. What an enormous favor!"

The faces of his audience first went red and then white. Even Cui Yong, ever shrewd and ruthless, found it hard to maintain his stoic mien. Cui Buqu's existence had long been a thorn in his side. Every day the child had remained alive was a headache, yet Cui Yong hadn't wanted to bear the

crime of murdering his own grandson. He'd left Cui Buqu to fend for himself within the Cui family's manor. Of course he'd known of the suffering his grandson was put through, but he had turned a blind eye, only intervening when it was thrust in front of him. Otherwise, he ignored it.

Yet the boy, who should have rightly died in infancy, had exceeded everyone's expectations. He hadn't perished out in the world. Instead, after many years, he'd returned to confront Cui Yong face-to-face.

Only Cui Pei stepped forward in excitement, reaching out to grab Cui Buqu's shoulder. He was stopped by an extended fan.

"A-Jie," he said around it, "it's really you! All these years, I've regretted not honoring your mother's last wishes. It was my neglect that forced you to wander the outside world, suffering untold hardships. How fortunate the heavens watched over you and kept you safe. Come back to us now and be my son. Your fourth uncle will treat you as his own; I'll never let anyone hurt you again."

Cui Yong frowned but held his tongue.

"My name isn't Cui Jie," said Cui Buqu. "It's Cui Buqu."

Cui Pei was taken aback. "Which Buqu?" he asked.

It was Feng Xiao who answered coolly, "Buqu meaning *won't go*. As in 'I won't go to my death.' A strikingly unique name. When others hear it, they'll surely wish to know its origins. Perhaps the entire world will then know of the filth within the Cui family."

Cui Pei paled and smiled bitterly. "Ah, this is my fault. It's all my fault!"

"A-Jie," Cui-dalang said, low-voiced, "we know you resent us, but what's past is past. Your mother is gone. Let go of these old grievances. Now you've returned, why not stay—"

Feng Xiao smiled. "So you can poison him a few more times? Or are you no longer ashamed of him? Will he be entered in the genealogy now? Will you proudly introduce him as a member of the Cui family and bury him in the family cemetery after his death?"

At that, Cui-dalang ground to a halt. He choked on his words and stared at Feng Xiao, unable to continue.

Cui Yong's eyes had never left Cui Buqu. Slowly he said, "If you are willing to return, Silang may adopt you. You'll become a legitimate member of the Cui family. No one will dare speak out against you."

Not only did Feng Xiao want to laugh at that, Cui Buqu did too. When they exchanged a glance, Cui Buqu could see pity in Feng Xiao's eyes. Not for Cui Buqu, but for Cui Yong.

Pity for Cui Yong because he was old. Pity because he'd sat comfortably in the seat of clan leader for so long that his eyes had grown blind. If Cui Buqu wished for the Cui family's acknowledgment, why had he waited so many years to return? Yet Cui Yong had spoken like he was granting an incredible favor, as if Cui Buqu would weep with gratitude at his selfless generosity.

Cui Buqu saw Feng Xiao mouth the words: *Daoist Master Cui. It's fortunate you take after your mother*.

He coughed and ignored him, turning back to the expectant Cui family. "I told you I returned to pay my respects to my late mother and attend the literary festival. As for the Cui family…" His gaze swept over Cui-dalang and Cui-san without pausing before finally landing on Cui Yong. "I've never been part of it. Since I wasn't then, I won't be now either. Perhaps you believe the Cui family loftier than the sky itself, but my surname is Cui for only one reason: to fulfill my mother's wish. I have no connection to the Cui clan of Boling."

His mouth twisted sharply, then quickly smoothed again. Every word he uttered was clear and deliberate, flying directly to the Cui family's ears. "This surname and this clan are of no importance to me. Forget accepting me into the genealogy; if you tried to gift me the entire Cui family, I'd have no interest. If Your Grace has nothing else to say, we'll retire to our rooms and rest, lest we oversleep and miss the festival. Apologies for the inconvenience."

Cui Buqu had thrown a thunderbolt into the pond that was the Cui family, sending the panicked shadows of shrimp and fish darting about in the water. With this, he took his leave, sleeves fluttering elegantly in the wind.

# Chapter 103

CUI BUQU AND FENG XIAO sauntered off. The remaining members of the Cui family sat in the hall, silent, for a long time.

Cui-san was mired in guilt. Ultimately, it was his mistake they were all paying for. He said not a word, yearning for everyone to forget he existed. He needn't have worried; Cui Yong had no attention to spare for him. He'd realized that in his rush to reply to Cui Buqu, he'd forgotten to inquire about his alias. He hadn't discovered whether the name Feng Xiao was truly related to the Jiejian Bureau, or if Cui Buqu was simply a fox playing a tiger, using someone else's name to intimidate them.

Cui-da had realized the same thing. "He came here in bad faith. I fear he'll stir up trouble at the literary festival tomorrow. Should we drive them out and prevent them from attending?"

"Father, dage," said Cui Pei. "He is still a member of the Cui family. It's late, and they will have nowhere to go if we turn them out. We should strive for a resolution rather than letting bad blood fester. We must handle this properly."

Cui-da frowned. "Silang, after so many years, how can you be this naive? If it was reconciliation he sought, why come knocking now? He obviously means to embarrass us before the visiting scholars, the local gentry, and the newly appointed commandery governor!"

"We've wronged him!" said Cui Pei, voice rising. "Did you really expect him to come home and thank us for our attentive care in raising him?"

"Were we not generous with him?" Cui-da, too, was growing angry. "In any other family, a bastard like him would have been smothered in the cradle. Who else would have let him grow up!"

Cui Pei's blood roiled in his chest. All the remorse that'd dogged him over the years had come to a head upon seeing Cui Buqu in front of him, and it was this that finally gave him the courage to stand up to his eldest brother. "This is an ugly thing to say, but it's the truth. It's not him who

should have been smothered, nor him who damaged the family reputation." He pointed at Cui-san, his hand trembling with rage. "It's San-ge!"

Cui-san leapt to his feet. "Silang, why do you go so far to defend that man? Could it be that you also lusted after her? Maybe that bastard is actually yours—"

Before Cui Pei could punch him, Cui-da had already knocked Cui-san to the floor.

The eldest Cui son was usually a steady man, yet right now, he seemed to be a different person as he called for the servants. "Sanlang has gone mad," he barked. "Gag him and take him away!"

Cui-san thrashed and struggled, but was inexorably dragged off. Cui Yong watched in silence, tacitly supporting his eldest son's decision.

Cui Pei took a deep breath and managed to calm himself. "Father, we can't drive them out now. They might go to the county magistrate in anger, and then everyone will know. It won't be pretty. If he really has some connection to the Jiejian Bureau, and the news reaches the emperor…"

Cui-da interrupted. "The emperor handles countless matters every day. Why would he care about something so trivial? Besides, the emperor himself comes from a wealthy family in Guanlong. All the noble houses are connected, and all of them have had their own scandals. If you ask me, we should drive the pair of them out of Boling before things get any worse!"

"Father!" Cui Pei was furious. "When his mother died, the Cui family exploited the fact that she had no one left. Her reputation suffered, and she wasn't even allowed to be buried with Erlang. That was injustice enough. All her child wants is fairness. Why not invite him here and explain everything frankly, then allow my sister-in-law to be interred in the family cemetery? Perhaps we can pacify the anger he's carried with him all these years. Surely that's a good thing? How will letting the incident blow up, reminding everyone of our shame, benefit the Cui family?!"

Cui Yong watched his two sons argue fiercely, each unable to persuade the other. Finally he raised his hand and gestured for quiet. "Are you certain you can persuade him?" he asked Cui Pei.

After a moment of silence, Cui Pei said, "As a son of the Cui family, he should have ranked fifth. But you raised him as a servant and never

entered him into our genealogy. Now he's returned, but Father, have you changed your mind?"

"Letting his mother into the family cemetery is more than generous," Cui-da complained. "If we officially acknowledge him, how do you propose we explain it to the public? What will the younger generation think if they find out? It was scandal enough at the time. Do you think you can dress it up now?"

Cui Pei remained silent, looking at Cui Yong.

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"Now that you've tipped your hand, they're probably going to throw us out."

Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao had sauntered back to the neighboring garden. News of what had happened was already spreading among the servants, but without orders from their master, they didn't dare stop the pair. At most, they were subjected to a few peculiar glances.

"They won't." Cui Buqu was unruffled. "They'll be arguing themselves in circles. Cui Yong is afraid we'll grow angry and make our grievances public. Before the literary festival is over, he'll try to pacify us and ensure we don't cause trouble. Only after the county magistrate and scholars have left tomorrow will he come to settle the score."

"Lady Yu entrusted you to your fourth uncle, Cui Pei, on her deathbed. Yet he failed to protect you. If he'd done his utmost, you'd have had a much happier childhood."

"He has a conscience, but he was limited in what he could do," Cui Buqu said coolly. "As an illegitimate child, it was impossible for him to stand up to the entire Cui family for my sake. If he hadn't been the only person in the family she could rely on, Lady Yu wouldn't have entrusted me to him. People have to look out for themselves first. I bear him no grudge."

Feng Xiao smiled. "Perhaps I should thank him. If he'd insisted on keeping you with him, my number of worthy rivals would have decreased by one."

He left the rest of the thought unvoiced: *And then my days would be far duller.*

Cui Buqu caught his meaning nonetheless. He nodded sympathetically. “I understand. I’ve seen many like Deputy Chief Feng, people like the Prince of Jin and the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. Children blessed by the heavens with above-average talent and intellect, who’ve never lacked for anything…”

Feng Xiao hummed and raised his voice in a veiled threat. “Am I only above average when it comes to intellect?”

Unfazed, Cui Buqu continued, “But because their paths are so smooth, their lives are boring. They look for ways to meddle and people to harass. Such behavior can only be described as moronic, as well as tragically masochistic.”

“And yet I seem to recall that someone was ordered to arrange an alliance with the Göktürk Khaganate,” Feng Xiao retorted, “but after hearing that the envoy from Khotan had been murdered, this man hatched every possible scheme to take the credit for himself. He ended up poisoned by incense of helplessness and almost died, vanquishing the enemy at the cost of crippling himself. Who was that, I wonder? Was he not a masochist?”

Cui Buqu’s lips twitched. “Surely it’s because I thought Deputy Chief Feng’s life was too boring? I took the initiative to deliver myself to your door.”

Feng Xiao chuckled. “Now that’s what I like to hear! The Cui family will be thinking that if they enter you into the genealogy as a legitimate member of the clan, you’ll be so overflowing with gratitude that you’ll forget all your past grievances. What foolishness—I admit I pity them. They don’t know what Cui Buqu is like at all. How can they think you returned for something so trivial?”

Cui Buqu sighed. There was no pity in his expression, only mockery. “They aren’t stupid. They’ve simply been standing at the top for too long, and so they underestimate others.”

The instant he finished speaking, the Zuoyue Bureau chief’s elegant demeanor was undermined by a flurry of sneezes.

“Letting yourself get soaked like that with your poor health,” Feng Xiao gloated. “At this rate you’ll collapse before you serve the Cui family their just deserts.”

Cui Buqu sneezed until his nose burned. His voice was muffled. “I’ll be fine after a night’s rest. But there’s a high chance that Cui Pei will come to see me. I must ask Deputy Chief Feng to ward him off if you wish to enjoy the spectacle tomorrow.”

Feng Xiao arched a brow. “What happened to your Zuoyue guards?”

“I’ve assigned both of them elsewhere. They won’t be back until tomorrow.”

“That can’t be right.” Feng Xiao stopped in his tracks.

Cui Buqu held his nose in an attempt to relieve the stinging sensation, but it only made his eyes water. “Qiao Xian isn’t here, and considering the circumstances, I can’t call a doctor. The Cui family would love it if I perished of illness before dawn. I need to go back to my room, take my medicine, and lie down. I must ask Erlang to see to these trivial matters.”

Feng Xiao was stunned by his gentle tone, so rarely heard. He met Cui Buqu’s hazy eyes, and for a moment no teasing or clever comebacks came to his lips. Combined with that familiar *Erlang*, Feng Xiao almost suspected Cui Buqu had been possessed, though the Ghost Month was some ways off.

As Feng Xiao stared at Cui Buqu’s retreating back, he suddenly remembered something. “Wait.”

But Cui Buqu had already sped out of sight, with no sign of his previous stumbling weakness.

*So he really was faking most of it*, thought Feng Xiao. Had he come here to watch the show, or to be one of Cui Buqu’s guards? He rubbed his chin and seriously considered the question.

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During the fifth month, the pomegranates were abloom.

In fact, pomegranates blossomed throughout the summer. This year's gathering had been dubbed a literary festival on the subject of pomegranate flowers, but the pomegranates were only a temporary addition. Last year, the theme had been Right General Wang's Orchid Pavilion[7] instead. Though the subject changed each year, the overall structure remained the same.

The Cui clan's literary festival was renowned throughout Boling Commandery—in fact, throughout the whole of the north. Many participants traveled there each year, all of them hoping for a chance at overnight fame. Some were scholars who'd made a name for themselves elsewhere. In the past, Boling's commandery governors had been known for their love of talented men, and could be expected to attend every year as a distinguished guest. An outstanding performance could earn one the governor's recommendation to become an official themselves. With the change in dynasty, a new commandery governor had been appointed. Still, to express his fellowship with the people, he'd confirmed that he too would attend and partake in the festivities.

The festival was set to take place in one of the Cui family's many gardens, this one bordering an area of the countryside that babbled with streams. Pear blossoms, yet to wither, still clung to the branches, and the ponds of the garden shone pristine as mirrors. Several pomegranate trees had been planted in a gorgeous arrangement. The wooden gate at the entrance had been left slightly ajar, so that anyone could enter and leave as they pleased. Maids came and went carrying fruit and wine, all of them beautifully attired and anointed with fresh fragrance. The scholars came in their billowing, wide-sleeved robes, their hair bound up with jade hairpins and silk ribbons. The whole made for a dazzling sight.

Cui Pei stood at Cui Yong's side, introducing to him the many distinguished guests who'd come to pay their respects. Among them were senior scholars more prestigious than Cui Pei, as well as old friends with whom he'd sometimes recited poetry. Cui Pei's literary talent was such that even if he didn't take first place at the festival today, he was sure to capture the attention of the crowd.

Yet for some reason, he felt uneasy. His eyelids kept twitching, an ill omen.

Cui-dalang had been greeting guests elsewhere, but now found an opportunity to pull Cui Pei aside. “What did he say when you went to see him last night?” he whispered.

Cui Pei gave a strained smile. “He was unwell from being caught in the rain and went to rest. His friend stopped me before I could see him.”

“What impudence!” Cui-dalang frowned. “He must be waiting for us to make him an even better offer.”

“I don’t think he’s that kind of person, Dage. If that’s what he was after, he would have come back long before this. The Cui family has failed him.”

Cui-dalang disagreed. “He has some kind of relationship with the Jiejian Bureau, and he thinks he can use it to threaten us. That’s why he’s acting so high and mighty; he believes he’ll return in glory. Well, whatever trouble he plans to stir up today, we won’t let it happen. I’ve sent men to keep an eye on them, and the moment they say or do anything they shouldn’t, we’ll have them carted away.”

As they spoke, the commandery governor and county magistrate both arrived, surrounded by commandery officials of all ranks. The atmosphere grew livelier still. Cui-dalang hadn’t time to say anything more; he stepped up at once to help his father forward as they greeted the officials.

Cui Pei ran his eyes over the crowd, finally locating Cui Buqu within a throng of dark heads. He was neither near nor far, standing under a pear tree beside Feng Xiao with a cheerful smile on his face. He looked just like every other attendee, ready to join the festivities.

The elegance of the pear blossoms heightened Feng Xiao’s matchless charm. Even Cui Pei, whose focus was Cui Buqu, found his attention straying to him.

Cui Pei suddenly realized. Cui Buqu had used the false name of “Feng Xiao”—could his friend also be using an alias? Surely a man like that, who exuded the air of a flawless jade, couldn’t be a person of such little fame and import.

At the other side of the garden, Cui Yong brimmed with enthusiasm. He greeted the county magistrate and the other important attendees, then stood and bowed to everyone present. After speaking a few words about the

original purpose of the festival and expressing his welcome, he said, “This year, we have more attendees than ever before. We are surrounded by distinguished friends and guests. This old man will declare it now: We are certain to produce a legendary masterpiece today. As a gesture of goodwill, I shall bestow a prize upon the most exceptional poet—the antique zither, Yuyin!”

# Chapter 104

AT THE SOUND of the zither's name, Feng Xiao sneezed. "No, no. That can't be right at all." He rubbed his nose.

Beside him, Cui Buqu was in a good mood. "You've been saying 'that can't be right' since last night. What's not right?"

Feng Xiao snorted. "Nothing is right."

Cui Buqu let it drop. "I didn't expect Cui Yong would offer Yuyin as the prize. Tell me, will you steal it openly, or in secret?"

Feng Xiao looked over at the zither. His vision was sharp; despite the distance, he could see the instrument clearly. Cui Yong plucked a few strings. The notes of the zither rippled out, striking hearts throughout the crowd.

It was indeed a beautiful zither. In the hands of a proficient musician, a zither like this could produce heavenly music. In the hands of a martial artist with profound internal energy, the results it might produce were unfathomable.

Yuyin wasn't the finest zither in the world, and obtaining it wasn't an absolute necessity for Feng Xiao. But now that he'd seen it, and it was within his reach, allowing it to slip through his fingers would be too great a pity.

He had already been considering how to obtain the zither when Cui Buqu asked his question. He raised a brow. "What do you mean? I'll simply dazzle them with my poetry. Then won't Cui Yong have to give it to me?"

"I didn't expect Deputy Chief Feng to be a greater poet than anyone else present," Cui Buqu said in surprise. "Why not let me hear your poem first?"

Feng Xiao snorted. "My poem has a value equal to Yuyin. What will you offer me if I let you hear it first?"

Cui Buqu remained silent for a moment, then said, "Alas, this Cui's sleeves are completely empty. You must save it to surprise the audience."

Around them, Cui Yong's declaration had made quite the splash. The vast majority of those present didn't know martial arts, but they'd heard of Yuyin. Even if they hadn't, they knew any zither Cui Yong was willing to offer as a prize had to be a famous one. Some of those who'd only come to watch the excitement now began trying to compose the most brilliant poems they could think of.

Cui Yong smiled and stroked his beard as he chatted with the commandery governor. Whether intentionally or not, his gaze strayed to Cui Buqu.

Feng Xiao marked it even before Cui Buqu did. "Look how you've frightened him. He's like a bird startled at the twang of a bow. How long until you put him out of his misery?" Feng Xiao jibed.

"Wait a moment." Cui Buqu's gaze fell on the man beside Cui Yong. He took a step forward before Feng Xiao grabbed his wrist, forcing Cui Buqu to turn back to him. "The new commandery governor is also an old acquaintance from those days," he confessed.

There weren't many left in the Yu family, and they'd already met all the relevant members of the Cui clan. Feng Xiao thought back to the story Cui Buqu had told. "Lady Yu's shixiong?"

Cui Buqu nodded. "Yuan Sheng lost his parents at a young age. Patriarch Yu recognized his aptitude and took him as a disciple, teaching him with great care. But one day, he vanished. Though Yuan Sheng left behind a letter, his exact whereabouts were a mystery. In truth, he went traveling across both the north and south, and was later recommended as an official. They gave him the name Yuan Sansi, which he began using. His first position was as a county magistrate in Huo County, and it seems he's now been promoted to the governor of Boling Commandery. You might say he's earned himself quite a bit of glory."

Perhaps Yuan Sheng had been transferred here by chance, or perhaps, at some point, he'd quietly returned to visit his family and became angry upon learning their sorry fate. If that was the case, there was a chance that he, too, was plotting revenge. Whatever the truth, it didn't change Cui Buqu's plans—he was a man who always finished what he started. Still, a long-lost acquaintance had resurfaced. It made sense to go and speak to him about his mother.

Feng Xiao released his wrist and shooed him off as one might a puppy or a kitten. “Go, go. Very soon now my venerable self will start displaying my poetic talents.”

Cui Buqu gave him a long, skeptical look before leaving.

Waving his fan, Feng Xiao slipped into the crowd with a smile.

“During the fifth month, the pomegranate flowers bloom…” recited a young scholar in a white robe and a black sash. Another scholar beside him was writing with incredible speed, transcribing everyone’s poems.

Several locally famous scholars had been selected to judge. One was an elderly man who’d served as a high-ranking official in the imperial court of the previous dynasty, and was currently one of the leaders of the northern literary world.

Although the theme of the festival was pomegranates, the poems themselves could be about anything. It was a gathering of talents, a delicious feast. Any topic was allowed. If someone wanted to experiment, they could perform a tragic quatrain. As long as the poem was outstanding, the poet was certain to become famous.

Everyone was wracking their brains for the perfect composition. Some had come with their masterpieces already written and perfectly memorized in hopes of drawing the eye of the famous scholars present. As for those who’d already made names for themselves, an exceptional performance was a must, lest they fail to live up to their own reputations.

The young scholar finished reciting his poem and nervously awaited his assessment. The old judges didn’t embarrass him; they only smiled. “A charming piece. An above-average entry.”

The scholar knew they meant his poem was mediocre and unremarkable. Forget ranking in the top three; he’d be lucky to make the top ten. The young man was crestfallen but dared not show it. He politely cupped his hands and sat down, vacating the stage for the next participant.

When it came to poetry, only talent mattered. Anyone could memorize a few books and copy some flowery prose; even if they didn’t capture the essence of the work, simple mimicry wasn’t difficult. But masterpieces that could draw applause from the audience weren’t composed through willpower alone. Since the Wei and Jin dynasties, only a few

geniuses capable of such work had emerged, such as the three Caos and Xie Lingyun.[8]

Amid this grand gathering of scholars, one man stepped out of the crowd, his voice ringing out across the garden for everyone to hear. “I, a man of some talent, have fallen in love with Yuyin at first sight. I am here to present some poems. If they meet the conditions proposed by Duke Cui, I ask him to be generous.”

The speaker was, of course, Feng Xiao. As the crowd turned their heads, many saw only a blinding radiance: This man’s face was as resplendent as a phoenix diving into a painting, like the spring sun shining down, bathing the entire garden in its glow.

Cui Yong frowned slightly. He’d just seen Cui Buqu approach the new commandery governor. He couldn’t stop him without making a scene, so he’d sent Cui-dalang to keep an eye on him. If Cui Buqu said something he oughtn’t, he’d drag him away. If worse came to worst, he’d apologize to the governor for his wayward guests. But he hadn’t expected Feng Xiao to appear at just that moment.

Still, they were only two men; what could they do? Even if they shouted the entire story in front of everyone, Cui Yong had ways of dealing with it. The trouble was, as long as they followed every rule, there was little Cui Yong could do.

People were naturally inclined to indulge a beautiful face. The white-haired old judge had once been a lofty official at the head of the Six Ministries, but he was no exception. He joked, “If this young friend has truly composed a masterpiece, I’ll steal the zither myself and present it to you if Duke Cui regrets his generosity.”

Feng Xiao smiled. “Thank you very much. I have composed a short quatrain.”

The old man nodded. “Whenever you’re ready.”

The crowd pricked up their ears, waiting to hear what kind of earth-shaking masterpiece this handsome young man had composed. Feng Xiao’s thin lips parted as he recited: “In the fifth month, the pomegranate blooms; Boling holds a grand celebration. The wise pursue fame and fortune, but I am here for Yuyin.”

Silence.

Awkward silence.

A silence in which even the spring warblers forgot to chirp. Everyone remained unmoving, their smiles frozen on their faces.

Dear gods! In all the literary festivals ever held by the Cui family, they'd never heard such a terrible poem! It couldn't even be called one. At most it was free verse, and exceedingly mediocre verse at that.

The crowd was certainly moved, but it wasn't with wonder. *Where did this dunce come from? Why would anyone embarrass themselves by bringing such shameful stuff to the literary festival?*

Even the white-haired old man who'd been charmed by Feng Xiao struggled to force a smile. "My young friend, this poem isn't up to par. You have much room to improve; please spend more time practicing."

Cui Yong nearly laughed his head off. Just what kind of ally had Cui Buqu brought with him? He was as useful as a glass hammer!

Feng Xiao didn't appear remotely embarrassed. "Didn't Duke Cui say the most outstanding poet would receive Yuyin as a gift? I've done my part. Will you go back on your word?"

"If I give you Yuyin for this…*piece* that can't even be called a poem, I fear everyone will speculate that you're my long-lost grandson," said Cui Yong coolly.

The crowd burst out laughing at Duke Cui's quip.

Feng Xiao was unfazed. "As the saying goes, there's no first place among literary scholars and no second place among martial artists. Everyone has their own opinions on what makes good poetry; this is a matter of personal taste. It's bad poetry anyone can recognize. You said the most exceptional poet would receive Yuyin, but you didn't specify whether it had to be exceptionally good. If the poem was exceptionally bad, I'd say it meets the requirements."

Cui Yong's lips twitched. "Young man, that's enough of your nonsense. You may go."

Everyone stared perplexedly at Feng Xiao. Either something was wrong with this man's head, or he was purposely acting the boor to get attention.

Feng Xiao took not a whit of it to heart but continued smiling brightly. Since Cui Yong had told him to leave, he obediently sauntered off, waving his fan. Several ladies who didn't care whether his poetry was good or bad flocked to him and began to ask questions, earning him jealous looks from the other men.

The newly appointed commandery governor, Yuan Sansi, gazed at the wan young man who'd approached him during the commotion. He waved a hand and sent his attendants away. "Can I help you?"

Normally it was impossible for a commoner to have a face-to-face conversation with the commandery governor. But this was a literary festival, and many of the attendees were rising talents. The commandery governor was here to enjoy the festivities with the people; it wouldn't do to put on airs.

But more significantly, when he saw Cui Buqu, he inexplicably felt as though he'd seen this young man's face before.

Cui Buqu nodded. "There's about to be a lot of excitement. The commandery governor need not intervene; merely watch from the sidelines. Afterward, there's something I'd like to discuss with you. Please don't leave too quickly."

Yuan Sansi was puzzled enough to let Cui Buqu's lack of etiquette slide. "What excitement?"

Cui Buqu glanced at the approaching Cui-dalang and smiled. "The Cui family is in bed with the Southern dynasty. That kind of excitement."

Cui-dalang had been watching Cui Buqu speak to the commandery governor. There was something strange about Cui Buqu—an indescribable dissonance in his attitude and demeanor. Cui Buqu was not an official, and he had no family behind him. Yet he was neither haughty nor humble as he spoke to the commandery governor. Rather, he had the air of a superior speaking to a subordinate. Truly, Cui-dalang thought, this man had a bloated opinion of himself.

Yet just as he got within earshot, he heard those words—*the Cui family is in bed with the Southern dynasty*—and his face went white. “What slander is this?!” he shouted on instinct.

Yuan Sansi’s eyes widened in surprise. His gaze moved between the two of them, but he was a wise man. He remained quiet, waiting to see what came of this. Cui-dalang had none of Yuan Sansi’s composure. He was panicked.

Cui Buqu gave him a small smile. “Is it slander? You should ask yourself. Tell me, did you do it of your own initiative, or was it on Cui Yong’s orders? Are the other members of the Cui family involved? If you come clean now, you might still have a chance to save them. But not for much longer.”

Cui-dalang steadied his voice with great effort. “A-Jie, I know you hold a grudge against the Cui family for your childhood. But the Cui family was merely trying to preserve your mother’s reputation and protect you. If the circumstances of your birth were made public, could you withstand the rumors and judgment?”

Yuan Sansi could no longer remain silent. “What are you talking about? What reputation? What circumstances?”

The corner of Cui Buqu’s lips curled up as he spoke, his tone uncommonly gentle. “Perhaps you don’t yet know the new commandery governor’s original name. He was once called Yuan Sheng, and he was my grandfather’s pupil. He was also Lady Yu’s shixiong, who left home as a young man and was thought to have vanished.”

Cui Buqu wasn’t surprised to see both of them staring at him in shock and bewilderment—Yuan Sansi because he’d mentioned Lady Yu, and Cui-dalang because of Yuan Sansi’s background. These were old events, thought to have been buried in yellow soil, never to see the sun again. Who’d have thought that one day, old acquaintances would reunite and those presumed dead would still walk the world, or that those who’d disappeared would return with a new identity?

The moment stretched. Cui-dalang’s face remained calm, but a storm was brewing in his heart.

Cui Buqu didn’t give him the chance to stop and think. “Since you’ve foregone your last chance to come clean, don’t blame me for being ruthless.”

Before Cui-dalang could digest these words, Cui Buqu raised his voice. “Come forward!”

Who should come forward? And from where?

Cui-dalang was still half a step behind as he turned to look over the heads of the crowd. Black-clad guards had suddenly appeared throughout the garden. They silently streamed toward Cui Buqu and went down on one knee before him.

“How did it go?” asked Cui Buqu coldly.

“Everything has been settled, Lord Chief.” The leader bowed his head. Two days prior, he’d received a secret order from Cui Buqu instructing him to bring a large number of Zuoyue guards from Yecheng. They had been waiting for this moment to capture the entire Cui family in one fell swoop.

Cui Buqu had brought two Zuoyue guards with him. One to gather the men, and the other to infiltrate the Cui manor and search for evidence. After Cui Buqu had revealed his identity, the Cui family had been thrown into chaos; they’d been too busy to pay attention to comings and goings in the manor. The guard had completed his task with ease.

“Surround the garden and arrest Cui-da. He can take you to his study and bedroom so you may search them,” Cui Buqu said, greatly satisfied.

Cui-dalang was still wondering if he was dreaming when his arms were twisted up behind his back. “Let go of me! Let go of me! Cui Jie, you traitor! You *bastard*!”

The appearance of the Zuoyue guards combined with Cui-dalang’s shouting caught everyone’s attention. Cui Yong hurried over, stunned. “You there, let him go! What’s the meaning of this?!”

Cui Buqu casually produced a token, spinning it a few times between his fingers before throwing it to the Zuoyue guard. The man caught it and held it aloft.

“Our lord is the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, personally appointed by His Majesty. Under orders from the throne, he has investigated the Cui family’s collusion with the Southern dynasty. For the past four years, Cui Xu, the eldest son of the Cui family, has been secretly aiding the Southern dynasty’s Linchuan Academy. Three years ago, a disciple of Linchuan Academy, Yue Gu, tried and failed to assassinate our emperor of Sui. As he fled, he passed through Boling, where Cui Xu helped him hide for several days.

“One year ago, the north suffered severe drought and famine. The court opened the granaries to distribute grain, appointing officials to provide aid. But Cui Xu secretly conspired with Yue Gu. He spread rumors that the court was unwilling to give aid and that the victims would be left to fend for themselves. Yue Gu’s outlaw friends then took the grain for themselves and sent it south, leaving the refugees to starve and driving them to revolt.”

Cui-dalang’s face grew paler with every word.

Cui Yong stared at his eldest son in disbelief. The Cui family had stood tall for generations; the change of dynasties hadn’t shaken their foundations. No matter the dynasty or generation, all emperors sorely needed talent—and the Cui family had produced many talented people. It was this that supported their noble status.

The division of the Central Plains into north and south had caused great turmoil. Countless heroes had emerged, all hoping to make their mark on history, while the aristocratic families had guarded their own interests. Cui Yong had seen that the emperor of Sui was skilled and wise, so he’d become partial to the northern dynasty. But of all his sons, only Cui Pei possessed the potential to become an official in the emperor’s government, and so he’d focused his remaining attention on his eldest grandson, Cui Fei. He couldn’t possibly have imagined his eldest son would do something like this behind his back.

Cui-dalang’s reaction made his guilt abundantly clear.

The crowd watched in shock, intimidated into silence by the Zuoyue guards. Surrounded by those black-clad figures, the sickly young man’s authority seemed to settle over him like a bright cloak. No one dared to look him in the eye.

Cui Pei had seen his eldest brother head toward Cui Buqu. Worried Cui-dalang would confront him, he'd followed to help, but had instead been treated to the sight of his brother arrested. He stood frozen in place.

Cui-jiuniang had been standing beside Feng Xiao, chatting with him. Now, she turned to look at him in confusion. "If he's the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, then who are you?"

# Chapter 105

CUI YONG DIDN'T HEAR Cui-jiuniang's question, nor did he hear Feng Xiao's response. At that moment he was solely focused on the disaster unfolding in front of him.

He'd thought Cui Buqu would at most go public with his story, or that he might find an opportunity to approach the commandery governor and apply to him for justice. Either way, Cui Yong had been confident the Cui family could handle it. Cui Buqu was only one man, after all, and one man up against the entire Cui family was like an egg striking a stone—the egg would end up smashed, and the stone unmoved. As long as Cui Buqu understood that, Cui Yong was prepared to be magnanimous. He'd let him study with Cui Pei, or perhaps give him one of the Cui family shops to manage. With a judicious application of carrot and stick, Cui Yong would soon force his surrender.

In this world, one's parents were one's greatest source of support. Some might be able to rely on their wife's family, but Cui Buqu had no parents, and was sickly to boot—how could he have a wife, let alone in-laws willing to back him? Merely surviving this long had been hard enough. If the Cui family was willing to relent and let him stay, that was more than generous. They owed him nothing further.

What was more, if Cui Buqu had returned to squeeze what he could out of the Cui clan, then exposing his own sordid background wouldn't help him. As long as Cui Buqu had half a brain, he wouldn't do anything so foolish.

Cui Yong had never expected Cui Buqu would instead target Cui-dalang.

The Zuoyue guards, clad in black and carrying long sabers, were an imposing sight, yet they knelt to Cui Buqu. Cui Yong could no longer deceive himself. The Cui Buqu of the present was not the sickly, helpless child of the past. This was not a man the Cui family could walk all over, or treat however they wished.

For the first time in his life, Cui Yong understood what it was to be at a complete loss. He couldn't question his eldest son in public, lest Cui-dalang incriminate himself further. He bit the inside of his cheek and squashed down his fury. "If Cui Xu has committed some crime, the commandery governor is the one with the prerogative to arrest and interrogate him, not you." Useless as it was, he moved to stand between his eldest son and Cui Buqu.

"This is a case of great importance," Cui Buqu said coldly. "Special circumstances call for special measures—there is no need to follow the common procedure. Take him away!"

"Wait a minute!"

Cui-dalang was silent, his face the color of ash, but Cui Yong continued to struggle futilely. "On what basis do you make this arrest?! You speak of evidence, but you haven't provided any. You can't expect us to simply accept it! Our Cui family has hundreds of years of history, not because of an emperor's favor, but thanks to our integrity and reputation! If you arrest my son today, you will lose the trust of every noble clan across the land. We shall request an audience with the emperor and demand justice!"

There were many nobles present, all of them from influential clans. Cui Yong's interests aligned with their own, and he had indeed raised some concerning points. Many began to raise their voices in pleas for mercy.

The county magistrate spoke up as well. "Today is a grand occasion. Even if there is merit to these accusations, can we not wait until the literary festival is over before taking anyone into custody?"

Everyone nodded in agreement. Some even asked Commandery Governor Yuan to step forward. But the newly promoted Governor Yuan didn't side with the people as they expected. He showed none of his previous geniality but remained silent, watching from the sidelines.

Cui Buqu looked at Cui Yong and saw the threat lurking in his eyes. Today, Cui Buqu had witnessed just how far a noble family's influence could stretch. If he detained Cui-dalang now, within a few days, the emperor's desk would be piled with countless memorials requesting Cui Buqu's impeachment. The common wisdom that aristocratic families stuck

together was perfectly true, and the Cui family of Boling was using those connections to the fullest.

Unfortunately, the person they were up against was Cui Buqu.

Cui Buqu didn't even blink. He raised his hand and twitched his fingers in a signal, and the Zuoyue guards, heedless of anyone else, dragged Cui Xu away.

"Cui Xu is engaged in traitorous dealings with a foreign nation," Cui Buqu said. "The evidence is conclusive. He will be taken back to the capital and handed over to the Ministry of Justice, the Court of Judicial Review, the Censorate, and the Zuoyue Bureau for a joint trial. If you have any objections, you may go to the capital yourself and file a complaint. But if I discover anyone here is an accomplice, I fear your complaint will come to nothing; instead you'll find yourself accompanying Cui Xu. This is what we call sharing life and death, a loyalty that reaches beyond the clouds."

His voice was gentle, but as his gaze raked over the crowd, no one dared to meet his eyes.

Despair surged over Cui Yong. It seemed no one would be willing to fight Cui Buqu for the Cui family.

"Father, save me! Save me!" Cui-dalang shouted. His voice gradually faded into the distance.

That was his son—his own flesh and blood. Cui Yong's heart ached; he couldn't take it anymore. He dragged his elderly body forward and stumbled. Only Cui Pei's quick action saved him from a fall as he caught his father and held him up.

"You…you're using your office to satisfy your personal grudges!" Cui Yong's eyes were bloodshot and staring as he snarled at Cui Buqu.

Cui Buqu raised an eyebrow. "You jest. What grudge could I possibly have against the Cui family!"

"You clearly hold a grudge over your mother's death!" blurted Cui Yong. "Ever since you were young—"

"Father!" Cui Pei's voice brought Cui Yong back to his senses. He abruptly fell silent, his lips trembling. What could he say? Should he reveal

Lady Yu's identity and Cui Buqu's parentage? It would only invite further humiliation.

Cui Buqu smiled at him, as if certain he wouldn't dare. The smile struck Cui Yong like a blow. His chest tightened, and he couldn't breathe.

Zuoyue Bureau, Zuoyue chief.

Who could have imagined that after many years of drifting, Cui Jie had not only ended up living well, but had amassed authority and status far beyond that of the ordinary man? Had he been merely a common official—a county magistrate or commandery governor—the Cui family would have no cause to fear him. But Cui Buqu had soared straight to the heavens: He was still young, yet he was already the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau. In comparison, despite being a few years older, Cui Yong's eldest grandson was but a scholar of small renown.

Cui Yong burned with regret. If only he'd relented last night and promised Cui Pei he'd allow Cui Jie into the genealogy. Perhaps then this all could have been avoided. But what good was "if only"? Just as when Doctor Sun had falsely claimed Cui Jie to be dead—if only they had made certain. But no one had doubted him or sought to investigate. Because back then, they'd thought nothing of Cui Jie.

Cui Pei was even more conflicted than Cui Yong. He was weighed down by guilt. He couldn't muster any words of remonstrance, but neither could he merely watch as his elder brother was hauled away. "Cui…Chief Cui," he pleaded. "My father's birthday is in half a month. Can't you please show my brother some clemency and carry out the arrest after that?"

Cui Buqu looked at him quizzically. "Why not ask me to wait until his birthday next year? Or the year after that?"

It was a clear rejection. Cui Pei was filled with anguish.

Bad luck came in threes, and it seemed that today the heavens were determined to throw misfortune after misfortune at the Cui family.

Moments after Cui-dalang had been taken away, the assistant county magistrate and a group of constables arrived with news of an incident at the Cui family's pharmacy at Baoning Hall. Doctor Sun had prescribed a patient the wrong medicine, killing them. He'd been arrested, but everyone

who’d been present on the day the medicine was prescribed had to be taken for questioning, including Cui-san and the pharmacy staff.

The staff had already been rounded up, but as Cui-san was at the Cui residence, the assistant county magistrate had shown up on his doorstep with the constables to fetch him.

The county magistrate knew the Boling Cui clan was powerful, and today was the day of their literary festival. He didn’t expect things to go smoothly and had planned to wait until the festival’s conclusion to privately discuss the matter with the county magistrate. But then Cui Buqu had surprised everyone by arresting Cui-dalang, and the assistant county magistrate had realized this was a prime opportunity. He summoned his men and made his approach.

When it rained, it poured. Cui Yong’s hoary head seemed to go whiter still. He spared not a glance for the county magistrate with his troubled expression but pointed at Cui Buqu and said in a trembling voice, “All right, all right, you’ve won!”

Cui Buqu didn’t bother trying to explain that this new disturbance had nothing to do with him. He turned to the county magistrate. “Since there has been a death, you should make your arrest. However, I’d like to come with you to observe the case. May I?”

Governor Yuan, who so far had remained silent, spoke up as well. “I’ll also take a look.”

The great and mighty gods had spoken, and the county magistrate dared not refuse. “This way, please!”

Cui Buqu and Governor Yuan departed, leaving the guests to stare at each other. No one had the heart to continue reciting poetry; one after another, they rose and made their farewells. Cui Yong was in no mood to see them off. He left that duty to Cui Pei and the steward, while the servants supported him back to his study to sit down.

Upon hearing the news, the women of the Cui family rushed over to beg Cui Yong to save the men. But Cui Yong knew—even if he managed to extricate Cui-san from his difficulties, there was no hope of escape for Cui-dalang.

Only one person could have saved him, but that man was only too eager to see the Cui family humiliated. He had no reason to help them.

Cui Pei had bidden farewell to the last of the guests, and now pushed open the door and entered the study. His heart ached when he saw Cui Yong, who seemed to have aged years in an instant.

His father raised his head and asked heavily, “If I personally knelt before him and begged, do you think he’d show us mercy?”

Cui Pei knew at once whom he meant. After a moment’s silence, he answered truthfully. “I fear he would not.”

Cui Yong closed his eyes. “The fault is mine—I was indecisive. Either do it or don’t. I wavered, and thus sowed the seeds of our destruction.”

“Father!” exclaimed Cui Pei in shock. What Cui Yong regretted was not how reprehensibly he’d treated Cui Buqu, but that he hadn’t pulled the weed up by its roots and finished him off when he’d had the chance.

“In truth, of all my sons, you’re the one I value the most,” said Cui Yong dully. “Your wisdom and cleverness far surpass those of your brothers. Your only shortcoming is that you’re too soft-hearted. An unfortunate weakness.”

Cui Pei went quiet. “Did Dage really collude with the Southern dynasty?”

Cui Yong smiled wryly. “Dalang is diligent, but lacking in talent. He’s always been that way. As his father, I coddled him, afraid he wouldn’t be able to shoulder his duties. How could I have guessed he’d take such a risk to prove himself…”

“Just now, Cui… He said the accusations against Dage will need to pass four rounds of joint review. There’s a chance yet for us to salvage this. But the incident at Baoning Hall must be taken care of today. Doctor Sun has saved countless of our people. How could he write the wrong prescription and kill someone? There must be more to this. Father, please think of a way to save him.”

“You needn’t worry.” Cui Yong’s voice was cold. “If Sun Jimin hadn’t helped him, how could that bastard have faked his death and

escaped? If that man has a shred of conscience, he'll find a way to absolve Sun Jimin of his crime."

Cui Pei was stunned. He looked upon his father as if seeing a stranger.

A knock at the door broke the stifling silence. Cui-jiuniang's voice came from beyond the door. "Grandfather! I must speak to you!"

Cui Pei took a deep breath and reordered his spiraling thoughts. He opened the door and whispered, "Jiuniang, go and rest, we're…"

"Fourth Uncle, listen to me," she cut in. "The man accompanying the Zuoyue chief is the deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau, Feng Xiao. I've heard the Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus are independent organizations—they each hold their own authority and neither is subordinate to the other. If you can get Feng-gongzi to put in a good word for us, maybe we can save First Uncle and Father!"

Cui Pei was taken aback. "Is this true?"

Cui Jiuniang nodded repeatedly. "I entered the city with them. Feng-gongzi really doesn't act like he's Cui-gongzi's subordinate. They bickered the entire way here; they don't seem to be friends."

Cui Pei looked back at Cui Yong.

"Has he left?" asked Cui Yong.

"I pleaded with him to stay. He's remaining here a little longer."

Cui Yong pondered a moment. "Jiuniang…no, Silang. You go with Jiuniang and invite him here."

Feng Xiao was indeed still there.

He hadn't left the festival with Cui Buqu. Instead he'd strolled the length of the garden with Jiuniang at his side, admiring the colorful blooms. He was content and carefree, a stark contrast to the anxiety suffocating the Cui family. When Cui-jiuniang returned with Cui Pei to invite him inside, he smiled but did not look surprised. "I thought Duke Cui would come himself."

Solemnly, Cui Pei cupped his hands. "My father has just suffered a great shock and is feeling unwell. Merely walking is difficult for him at the

moment. I can only ask Feng-gongzi to deign to visit him. We beg your forgiveness."

"Feeling unwell?" Feng Xiao smiled impishly. "Cui Buqu suffers from both asthma and an affliction of the heart. Surely he's been feeling unwell since birth."

Cui Pei smiled wryly. "Are you trying to defend Cui…gongzi? It seems Father's plea is hopeless indeed."

"How do you know there's no hope before your father has spoken to me?" said Feng Xiao. "Maybe he can offer something that will satisfy me." He raised his fan, a refined gesture that revealed his own high status. "Lead the way."

Cui Pei's heart was a tangle of emotions. Halfway back to the study, he couldn't resist asking, low-voiced, "Has Cui Jie fared well these years?"

"Who is Cui Jie?"

"A slip of the tongue," said Cui Pei dully. "Indeed, no one would want such a name."

Feng Xiao smiled. "Every one of his subordinates treats him like a priceless treasure. They're terrified of him encountering the slightest hardship and would die for him in an instant. What do you think? Is he faring well?"

"Of course, he's faring very well," Cui Pei said hoarsely.

"If you left the Cui family, you'd lose at least half of your value. He, on the other hand, doesn't need the Cui name to be Cui Buqu."

Cui-jiuniang only followed half of the winding implications of this exchange; her face showed puzzlement. Cui Pei fell silent, unwilling to embarrass himself further.

*Father really did commit a great wrong,* he thought. Not because he'd failed to kill Cui Buqu and silence him, but because he'd allowed him to be born yet never showed him any love. If he had, would he now be worrying about his lack of worthy successors?

At last, Cui Yong saw Feng Xiao arrive. To him, those fifteen minutes he'd waited seemed to have lasted half a lifetime.

He waved Cui Pei and Cui-jiuniang out, then stumbled to his feet and knelt before Feng Xiao. “I plead with Feng-gongzi to save Cui Xu’s life.”

Feng Xiao’s mouth curved with interest. “Why should I save him?”

He didn’t urge Cui Yong to stand, so Cui Yong endured the pain in his knees as he prostrated himself. “The Jiejian Bureau was personally established by the emperor. You have an immense authority not inferior to the Zuoyue Bureau. Out of everyone in Boling, you’re the only one who can save Dalang’s life. I understand that Feng-gongzi is a man of sophisticated tastes and that ordinary objects hold no interest for you. I am willing to gift you Yuyin, as well as Emperor Wu of Han’s beloved vessel of white nephrite jade.”

Feng Xiao smiled. “Didn’t Duke Cui disparage my poem today? You said if you gave me Yuyin, everyone would think I’m your grandson.”

Cui Yong bowed his head. “I was too blind to recognize greatness and spoke out of ignorance. I beg Feng-gongzi’s forgiveness.”

“In that case, does Duke Cui think my poem was good?”

Cui Yong had never lowered himself to plead like this before. But for the sake of his eldest son’s life, he had no choice. He mentally held his nose and lied. “Your lordship’s poetry is refreshing and refined. It carries the flair of the Wei and Jin dynasties and is unparalleled in your generation. Though it at first appeared vulgar, it is in fact elegant. This old fool has poor eyesight and failed to give it due consideration before speaking recklessly. I slandered your lordship and misunderstood your painstaking efforts. I shall write something to clear your good name in the future.”

He forced this flowery praise through his teeth with a deadened expression, feeling nauseated.

But Feng Xiao seemed enormously pleased. He said gleefully, “It appears Duke Cui isn’t very happy to accept me as your grandson.”

Cui Yong made himself smile. “How could I deserve something like that? Your lordship is a magnanimous man; I beg your lenience.”

Feng Xiao shook his head. “So the eldest son of the Cui family is only worth a zither and a jade bottle. Isn’t that a bit too cheap?”

So he wanted to haggle. Cui Yong ground his molars, but there was nothing he could do. “I have four granddaughters. Of the four, Jiuniang is the prettiest. She’s also well-learned and well-mannered. If your lordship is amenable, I can offer her as your wife.”

“As a wife? Then I’d really become your grandson-in-law.”

Cui Yong closed his eyes, hopelessness welling up in his heart. But since he’d already come this far, there was no room for regrets.

“As a wife, or as a concubine. Whatever your lordship wishes.”

# Chapter 106

CUI BUQU SNEEZED several times in rapid succession.

From the moment he'd woken, he'd been coughing. His handkerchief had barely left his hand. He felt fogged and drowsy, probably because he'd soaked in the rain the night before. Still, he spent over half of every year in a similar state—he'd long grown used to it.

The county magistrate of Anping walking next to him, however, was anxious. This close to Cui Buqu, Magistrate He could see how sick he looked. It was the end of the fifth month, and summer was approaching. Yet the hands peeking out from under this man's cloak were like icy jade, so thin and bony they were liable to snap at the slightest touch. He'd thought to ask after his health, but Governor Yuan spoke first.

"Why not have a doctor look you over? We can conduct the interrogation afterward." He didn't speak with the polite and perfunctory tone officials often used but with a senior's concern for his junior. The county magistrate glanced sidelong at the commandery governor.

"I'm fine," said Cui Buqu. He sneezed again. Feng Xiao must be speaking ill of him behind his back. He produced a small porcelain vial and tipped out a pill, then popped it into his mouth and swallowed without batting an eye, as if it were something he did every day.

Had Qiao Xian been there to see him taking tonics meant for modifying the workings of his body as treatment for his cold, she would have coughed up blood in her rage. But there were only two witnesses: Commandery Governor Yuan and Magistrate He. They had no understanding of medicine, so when the pills stopped his sneezing, they didn't chide him further.

By the time they'd reached the county office, the assistant magistrate was there with the group of related persons who had been temporarily detained in the prison while they awaited the county magistrate's questioning.

With both Cui Buqu and Commandery Governor Yuan present, the county magistrate dared not tarry. He immediately asked the assistant magistrate to bring forth the deceased's next of kin.

The next of kin was the husband of the dead woman, who was himself from a local family in the city. Their household was a wealthy one, and the deceased had been with child. She'd been overly anxious of late and had gone to Doctor Sun for a prescription to lower her chance of miscarriage. But after drinking two bowls of the concoction in the afternoon, she'd found herself suffering severe stomach pain by evening. She'd experienced vaginal bleeding that escalated to premature labor. Severe blood loss had claimed the lives of both mother and child.

She'd died after taking this medicine, despite being perfectly healthy beforehand. Her family immediately connected her death to the prescription. Her husband went to the county magistrate's office and filed a complaint, and the assistant magistrate brought his constables to arrest Doctor Sun and the pharmacy staff.

These tragic deaths had turned what should have been the joyous occasion of welcoming the birth of a child into a funeral. The husband's face was lined with sorrow. When he saw Doctor Sun, he surged forward and grabbed his collar. "Doctor Sun," he cried. "Our family trusted you completely. Why would you kill her?!"

Doctor Sun's hair and beard were wild and uncombed. He was a sorry sight, but still he shook his head. "Impossible. I've been practicing medicine for decades. I've never miswritten a prescription!"

Choking with grief and anger, the husband said, "I kept the jar of leftover ingredients and had it examined. They said it contained toad venom! That's poisonous! How could you prescribe it to a pregnant woman!"

Sun Jimin looked stricken. "It's not possible. I would never give a pregnant woman toad venom! Four maces of bitter orange, three maces of magnolia bark, three maces of red nutsedge, two maces of amomum fruit, two maces of baizhu, two maces of orange peel…"

He recited the ingredients one by one, then concluded, "The prescription was divided into three doses, all to be taken by a woman five

months into her pregnancy. This was the prescription; I remember it clearly. It did not include toad venom!”

“Three doses of medicinal soup, and the victim consumed one,” said the assistant magistrate. “The leftover ingredients for the remaining two doses are untouched. Does the lord magistrate wish to examine them?”

“Bring them here,” said the county magistrate.

Someone fetched the jar of leftover herbs. Cui Buqu had been sick all his life; even if he couldn’t treat himself, he had amassed a decent amount of medical knowledge and could recognize some herbs. Soon enough, he identified the toad venom in the jar of herbs, as well as in the remaining bagged portions of uncooked ingredients. He picked out the ingredients one by one. “In addition to the toad venom, there’s also henbane. Were you perhaps worried the patient would die too slowly?”

Doctor Sun shook his head repeatedly. “It’s impossible! Impossible! I never prescribed this!”

“The prescription?” Cui Buqu looked to the assistant magistrate.

After a trip to the pharmacy, it was normal practice for the patient to bring the medicine back home, where they’d brew and administer it. The written prescription itself remained at the pharmacy for safekeeping.

The assistant magistrate was a quick and capable man. He’d already ordered someone to gather up all the written prescriptions. “They’re here, my lord!”

He brought out the prescription, but Cui Buqu didn’t look at it. He gestured for someone to show it to Doctor Sun.

“We compared it to another of your prescriptions,” the assistant magistrate said to the doctor. “The paper is that of Baoning Hall, and the handwriting matches. Do you have anything else to say?”

Doctor Sun took the prescription with an expression of disbelief. “This prescription…”

The assistant magistrate observed the change in his expression. “Are you saying you didn’t write this?”

“No, let me think…” Sun Jimin murmured. His eyes widened. “This is the wrong prescription! This is what I prescribed Lady Lu. Aside from

the toad venom, all the ingredients match!”

The assistant magistrate asked someone to bring out the pharmacy assistant, a youth seventeen or eighteen years old. He had a sharp-witted look about him, but just now he seemed nervous, his clever eyes darting around the room.

“Tell us everything you know again, in detail,” said the assistant magistrate.

“Y-yes! Of course!” The youth bowed. “Yesterday morning, the madam was suffering from another stomachache, so she sent someone to ask Doctor Sun to prescribe her some medicine, as usual. This lowly one filled the prescription according to the instructions and took the medicine to the manor. Her maid was waiting at the gate to receive it.”

The madam in question was none other than Cui-san’s wife, Lady Lu.

Cui-san was the least accomplished of Cui Yong’s four sons. He spent all his time on idle pursuits and had achieved nothing of note. He’d been confined to Boling for years, his father and brother watching his every move. While this prevented him from causing more problems, it didn’t turn him into a diligent scholar. To stop him from wasting his life completely, Cui Yong had given him Baoning Hall, one of the Cui family’s pharmacies, to manage. He was responsible for its financial management, and didn’t need to share any profits with the rest of the family. It was a gift, but it also gave him something to occupy himself with.

In reality, the pharmacy was well-established. It was run by the shopkeeper and assistants, along with renowned physicians like Doctor Sun, so Cui-san needed to do scarcely any managing at all. Their so-called boss simply left everything to the shopkeeper and carried on with his life of leisure.

“That’s right,” said Sun Jimin. “Henbane is poisonous, but when neutralized with other herbs and taken in small doses, it can alleviate stomach pains. But the toad venom is wrong. I never prescribed her toad venom!”

The pharmacy assistant was surprised. “But Doctor Sun, I was next to you when you wrote it. I watched as you added each ingredient. How can you not remember?”

Sun Jimin refuted this claim immediately. “I’d never misremember! You must be mistaken. At any rate, that prescription was meant for Lady Lu. How did it end up with Lady Chen?!”

The assistant magistrate raised his chin and gestured to the pharmacy assistant. “Continue.”

“Lady Chen came for a check-up at around the same time, and again, Doctor Sun was the one who wrote her prescription. I portioned out the ingredients for both prescriptions myself. As I was leaving, I ran into one of the Chen family servants. Both prescriptions were separated into three doses and stored in the same type of paper packet. This lowly servant must have mistakenly given the wrong medicine to Lady Chen!”

Now everything had become clear.

Doctor Sun had seen two patients and written two different prescriptions. The assistant had accidentally mixed up the packets of medicine. As a result, Lady Lu had escaped unscathed, while Lady Chen and her child had been poisoned in her stead.

“Sun Jimin, what do you have to say?” asked the country magistrate.

Doctor Sun looked at the prescription and smiled bitterly. “In all my years as a doctor, I have never miswritten a prescription nor mixed up an ingredient. I did not prescribe the toad venom.”

The county magistrate sighed. “You’re over seventy now, and your eyesight is weaker than it was. Miswriting a prescription to include an extra ingredient is not impossible. Even if you deny it, the evidence speaks for itself. You cannot escape the charge of manslaughter. Manslaughter is classed as one of the six types of homicide under Sui law, but it’s a lighter charge than premeditated murder. You’ve saved countless lives in your years as a doctor. I’ll appeal for leniency on your behalf and explain what happened, but the final decision will rest with the Ministry of Justice. Will you plead guilty?”

The doctor was of advanced age. Even if he was sentenced to whipping and exile rather than death, he wouldn’t survive the punishment. However, the magistrate tactfully left this unsaid.

But Doctor Sun still shook his head. “I will not. I didn’t miswrite the prescription.”

At the same moment, a constable rushed in. “Lord Magistrate! Lady Lu, Cui-sanlang’s wife, seeks an audience. She claims to have important information pertaining to the case!”

Magistrate He glanced over at Cui Buqu and Governor Yuan. When they registered no objection, he said, “Let her in.”

In no time at all, a woman in red appeared at the door and bowed respectfully. “Greetings to the lord officials.”

“No need for all the courtesies,” said the county magistrate. “What information do you have to report? Tell us quickly.”

“I ask the lord magistrate to please summon my husband. He must be questioned in person.”

“Send for Cui-san,” said Cui Buqu coolly.

Lady Lu couldn’t help studying this man. Though the truth of Cui Buqu’s identity had come as a lightning strike to Cui Yong and his sons, he’d forbidden them from spreading the knowledge further. Even Cui-jiuniang was unaware. All the rest of the Cui family knew was that Cui Buqu was the powerful and influential chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, and that he’d arrested Cui-dalang. They had no idea he was the son of Lady Yu, whom they considered a disgrace upon the family.

Lady Yu had been defiled by Cui-san. Though it’d been a monstrous act of rape, her reputation had been ruined; Cui Yong did not permit her to be buried in the family cemetery. Many of the Cui family’s younger generation had bullied Cui Jie as children, but they hadn’t been aware of his parentage. And as they’d grown up, their memories had faded. Many of them even mistakenly thought Cui-er had died without ever marrying.

But Lady Lu was an exception. She could never forget the humiliation she suffered on account of Lady Yu and her son. The previous night, Cui-san had come home in obvious distress. She’d hounded him with questions until he’d finally divulged some details. She knew Cui Jie wasn’t dead, and that he’d in fact returned under a new identity.

The county magistrate, seeing her staring openly at Cui Buqu, was shocked to see a lady from the prestigious Lu clan of Fanyang acting so immodestly. He coughed. “Lady Lu, this is a court of law. These men are

high-ranking officials; I ask you not to look directly at them without their permission."

"Apologies, Lord Magistrate," said Lady Lu. "It's only that Cui-langjun looked somewhat familiar, and I couldn't help but take a second glance."

Cui Buqu lowered his head and played with a jade accessory hanging from his belt, as if he hadn't heard her words. A strange feeling welled up within Lady Lu. She couldn't have said whether she was glad or disappointed.

Within the span of their conversation, Cui-san arrived. When he saw Lady Lu, he froze. Upon noticing that Cui Buqu was present as well, his face drained of color.

"Can you speak now?" the country magistrate asked Lady Lu.

Lady Lu bowed. "Bear witness, my lords. As Doctor Sun himself has said, he's been a physician for decades. How could he miswrite a prescription and kill someone by mistake? The answer is that he didn't make a mistake at all! He did it on purpose! I was Doctor Sun's intended target, but thanks to a fortunate coincidence, I escaped death!"

It was a stupefying statement.

Magistrate He glanced instinctively at Governor Yuan and Cui Buqu, but neither of them met his eyes. He had no choice but to turn back to Lady Lu. "That's quite the accusation, my lady. Be aware that bearing false witness carries the penalty of imprisonment."

"It is not false. I have evidence!"

"Speak."

"My husband has secretly been keeping a mistress," Lady Lu began. "I've always known, but I turned a blind eye for the sake of our family's peace and harmony. The mistress is from a respectable family. She got my husband to promise that if I were gone, he'd take her as his new wife. Then she'd be able to marry into the Cui clan."

Cui-san leapt to his feet. "Nonsense! That never happened!"

Lady Lu sneered. "You were cooing at each other beneath the grape vines in broad daylight. You felt no shame, yet you failed to realize the

maid with you overheard and reported it back to me."

Cui-san was stunned. "Yu Song was your spy?!"

Lady Lu snorted coldly and went on. "Three days ago, one of his mistress's confidants went to Doctor Sun. What they discussed I don't know, but I do know the woman arrived with a bag of silver and returned empty-handed. They must have bribed Doctor Sun to prescribe medicine that would kill me!"

"Ridiculous!" Sun Jimin's white beard trembled with agitation. "All my life, I've moved through this world with a clear conscience. I could never do such a thing!"

"If the lord magistrate doesn't believe me, he can send someone to search Doctor Sun's house. Perhaps they'll find that bag of silver."

Lady Lu felt someone's eyes on her. Their regard was sharp as a knife, piercing her to the core. She looked up and met Cui Buqu's gaze.

The moment his ice-cold eyes met hers, she felt herself go weak.

She remembered another pair of eyes like those, inscrutable and tranquil. Inexplicably angry, she blurted, "You can also summon that 'second wife' of his and question her. She looks rather like an old acquaintance of yours, Cui-langjun. Perhaps you can guess whom!"

Only Cui Buqu and Governor Yuan took her meaning. Governor Yuan's expression finally went dark. "I have no further questions. Take Lady Lu away. Her shrill screeching is giving me a headache!"

"No need," said Cui Buqu. "Let her stay. She can witness the murderer's fate."

Lady Lu's lips had been pursed with confidence, but at this, an ominous feeling came over her.

Fortunately, the heavens seemed to be on her side. The men dispatched to search Doctor Sun's house returned quickly. With them was Cui-san's rumored mistress.

The mistress didn't have Lady Lu's bright and vivacious beauty. She was a delicate, refined woman who brought to mind willows swaying in the wind. Her eyes seemed to hold a certain fragility; she indeed looked somewhat familiar.

Governor Yuan realized at once. Those eyes, that mouth—did they not resemble Yu Mo’s?

He glared furiously at Cui-san. Lady Lu sneered and stood straighter. Cui-san’s mistress resembled Cui Buqu’s mother. It ought to be humiliating for the man that sat before her—the man named Cui Buqu. When he saw this woman’s face, he wouldn’t feel nostalgia but burning anger, just like Governor Yuan. Cui-san’s whore was done for.

But Lady Lu’s burst of triumph swiftly faded. There was no anger on Cui Buqu’s face. His gaze simply swept over the mistress to land again on Lady Lu.

She felt herself begin to panic. Had her ploy of killing someone with a borrowed knife failed?

# Chapter 107

THE MISTRESS'S FAMILY was poor. After she'd caught Cui-san's eye, he'd taken care of her and given her a brief taste of the good life, but she'd never witnessed a scene like this before. By the time she arrived before the magistrate, her legs had gone weak.

An hour passed, and the assistant magistrate returned with the constables. Sure enough, he held a small bag of silver.

"There you have it," Lady Lu crowed. "Everyone knows Doctor Sun is an upstanding doctor free from corruption, and that his generosity with his patients has left his family on the brink of poverty. Where did he get so much money?"

Magistrate He weighed the silver in his hand. It was about thirty taels, more than his own annual salary. It couldn't be payment for simple medical expenses.

The mistress had begun to weep. "A few days ago, I was feeling unwell. I did send someone to ask if Doctor Sun could come examine me, but I only paid the pharmacy's fee. I've never seen this bag of silver in my life!"

The assistant magistrate remained unmoved. "Traveling from your house to Baoning Hall requires crossing half of Anping, and there are two other Cui family pharmacies along the way. Yet you insisted on going to Sun Jimin. Why?"

The woman stammered, starting to speak and then stopping. She looked timidly up at Cui-san.

His wife's belligerence had stoked Cui-san's fury. "Because she's pregnant!" he shouted. "I asked her to see Doctor Sun because he's good at preventing miscarriage!"

Lady Lu sneered. "It's crystal clear what happened. She was pregnant and favored, so she wanted to get rid of the wife. She went to Doctor Sun and bribed and threatened him into killing me!"

“Nonsense!” roared Cui-san.

The mistress wept piteously. “I didn’t! I wouldn’t dare!”

“What wouldn’t you dare? Did you not persuade Sanlang to marry you and bring you into the Cui family?!” Lady Lu held her head high. “Lord Magistrate, respected officials. After learning that this woman was secretly in contact with Sun Jimin, I sent someone to investigate. It was a simple matter to discover that Doctor Sun is old friends with this whore’s father. That along with the silver is proof enough!”

The county magistrate looked at Doctor Sun. “Is this true?”

Doctor Sun sighed. “Her father was my patient for a long time, and we often played weiqi together. We keep in touch; that’s all.”

Lady Lu scoffed. “‘Keep in touch?’ Is that what you call it?”

“Doctor Sun,” Magistrate He said softly, “I’ve heard about your good reputation since I became magistrate. Becoming confused in your old age and miswriting a prescription is one thing. But Lady Lu claims you killed a woman for money. That isn’t manslaughter; it’s murder. If you’re found guilty, the sentence is death. Do you have anything you wish to tell us?”

Doctor Sun smiled bitterly. “At this point, what more can I say? Only that, as a doctor, I can cure people’s bodies of ailments, but I can’t cure their hearts of wickedness!”

Magistrate He frowned in confusion. What mattered in a court of law was evidence. Sun Jimin’s words had been to vent his anger rather than explain himself. Had he given up in the face of conclusive evidence? “Then you’re pleading guilty?” he asked.

Doctor Sun closed his eyes and remained silent.

Magistrate He turned to Cui Buqu and Governor Yuan. “Is there anything your lordships wish to add? If not, I will take them into custody.”

“Lady Zhou is pregnant,” said Cui-san anxiously. “Can’t you grant her probation?”

The county magistrate was displeased. “She’s suspected of murder, and you wish to grant her probation?”

Before Cui-san could answer, Cui Pei arrived in a rush. Some men moved to bar his way, lest he incite even more chaos.

“Please forgive me for my lateness!” he panted from the doorway.

From the moment he heard the charge had changed from manslaughter to murder, he’d been running about outside, searching for some way to exonerate Sun Jimin. “These are the prescriptions I found at Baoning Hall and in Doctor Sun’s house. There are over a thousand of them, records of the medicine he’s prescribed to patients over the years. I’ve yet to collect them all, but none of these contain a single mistake. As for the accusation of murder, I have here a letter of appeal I wrote myself, containing the fingerprints of over fifty residents of this county. All are patients who have been treated by Doctor Sun. That’s all I could collect on short notice. Please give me more time, and at least half of Anping’s population will be willing to add their fingerprints!”

Gathering fifty fingerprints in an hour was no mean feat. Cui Pei hadn’t wasted a second—he was drenched in sweat from running back and forth.

Magistrate He sighed. “Cui-gongzi, I don’t have the authority to pass judgment on a crime as serious as murder. It must go through the Three Bureaus and be reported to the emperor for the final verdict.”

“I know,” said Cui Pei, “But the prescriptions and this letter of appeal might be enough to help Doctor Sun. Perhaps they may lighten his sentence!”

Sun Jimin silently looked at the stacks of prescriptions and scarlet-inked fingerprints. His eyes reddened at the rims.

“Brother-in-Law!” Lady Lu snapped. “Sun Jimin and Lady Zhou have conspired to kill me, yet you’re running around pleading for clemency?”

“Sister-in-Law,” said Cui Pei. “I believe Doctor Sun. He would never do such a thing.”

His righteousness drove Lady Lu to greater fury. She threw her head back in a scornful laugh. “Wonderful! Just wonderful! The entire Cui family is against me!”

“Are you through making a spectacle of yourself?!” Cui-san shouted. “If you are, then leave!”

He made a grab for Lady Lu’s wrist, but she flung his hand aside. “If I’m making a spectacle, what about you?!” she asked through gritted teeth. Her eyes were bloodshot, and Cui-san was momentarily stunned to silence.

Magistrate He thought a moment. “This is a complicated case. We’ll have to sort through the evidence before I make any recommendation.”

He did sympathize with Sun Jimin, but sympathy couldn’t absolve a man of his crimes. The best he could do with his limited authority was stall the case for a few more days.

“There’s no need to wait,” Cui Buqu said. He looked at Lady Lu with a smile that contained no mirth. “There’s one thing I don’t understand.”

Lady Lu pursed her lips and drew herself up. The hands clasped primly over her stomach secretly tightened on her handkerchief.

“Cui-san is a mediocre man of great ambition,” said Cui Buqu. “He brims with resentment, and the stringent standards he applies to others are never applied to himself. Over the years, he’s disgraced himself and humiliated you again and again. On top of all that, he now has a pregnant mistress and wants you dead. Why, then, are you defending him and helping cover up his lies?”

Lady Lu’s face went pale.

Cui Buqu pointed to Cui-san. “Is a piece of trash like this worth lying for? Is he worth sacrificing your life to protect?”

“How can you say that about me?” Cui-san raged. “You unfilial little __”

Cui Pei didn’t wait for him to finish; he kicked his brother to the ground.

“This is a court of law!” Cried Magistrate He. “What do you think you’re doing?! Lock them all up!”

“Cui-san raised his voice in court, flouting the law. What is the punishment for his infraction?” asked Governor Yuan coldly.

“Thirty lashes!” said Magistrate He.

Two men stepped forward and stripped Cui-san's trousers without a word and began whipping his back and legs. When he screamed, the county magistrate waved a hand. A constable stuffed his mouth with cloth, leaving him to groan impotently.

Cui Pei lowered his eyes and frowned, as if he neither saw nor heard.

After the thirty lashes, Cui-san was covered in cold sweat. He had no more strength to speak, let alone shout. All he could do was whimper. No one called him a doctor. Cui-san dragged his bloody buttocks over to sprawl on the courtroom floor, half-dead.

Lady Lu's eyes shone with tears. She looked away.

Cui Buqu picked up the prescription that had cost Lady Chen her life, then pulled another from the stack. "Sun Jimin has been practicing medicine for decades. He's never made a mistake. If he had, the citizens of Anping County would have drowned him in their spittle by now. Isn't that so, Magistrate He?"

The country magistrate nodded. "That's right."

Cui Buqu smiled. "The handwriting and the paper match that of Doctor Sun's previous prescriptions. There's no difference there. But even the most well-crafted forgeries have their flaws."

"What flaw?" Magistrate He asked.

Cui Buqu pointed at the prescription. "The ink. Smell them."

Governor Yuan took the two prescriptions and sniffed one, then the other. "They do smell different."

"Doctor Sun's previous prescriptions were written in a low-grade ink, known as shenyan ink. Though shenyan ink is also made in ink-firing sheds, the same as top- and middle-grade inks, the soot it's made from is that closest to the fire. There's no need for a pharmacy to use high-quality ink when writing prescriptions. Other than the standard prescriptions in constant use, all the prescriptions in Baoning Hall will be written in shenyan ink.

"As for this prescription"—Cui Buqu gave it a shake—"it's written in top-grade ink. The handwriting is nearly identical, but the ink is rich, the strokes smooth, and it smells faintly of pine. Surely Doctor Sun wouldn't

have purchased a high-quality inkstick and ground himself some ink just to kill someone?”

“You’re right,” said the county magistrate. “Men, send someone to the Sun residence at once. Bring back all the brushes and ink!”

“Once you have them, don’t hurry back,” said Cui Buqu, speaking slowly. “Go to the Cui manor and also fetch the inkstones in Cui-san’s study.”

Cui-san abruptly raised his head.

He’d been lying there limp as a dead duck hanging in a meat cellar, but now he stiffened, his eyes filled with fear and panic. He couldn’t miss the meaningful smile on Cui Buqu’s lips. Cui-san’s expression was that of a man whose death was imminent, frozen in place as he watched a demon about to pounce.

Cui Pei looked at Cui-san in disbelief. His brother was a poor actor—his expression said it all. Governor Yuan and Magistrate He also saw the truth from his reaction.

Cui Buqu smiled. “From what little I know, Cui-san’s home life is in perpetual turmoil. Husband and wife are constantly at odds, and quarrels make up their daily routine. Yesterday, while entering the Cui manor as a guest, I saw them pushing and shoving as they complained about each other. Cui-san has been keeping a mistress in the city, something that was impossible to conceal from Lady Lu. As a result, the discord between them intensified. Sun Jimin didn’t write this fatal prescription; Cui-san did. The one he wanted to poison was not the innocent Lady Chen, but his own wife, Lady Lu.”

Cui Pei had already realized the truth, but hearing it spoken aloud still stunned him.

Some muffled moans emerged around Cui-san’s gag that sounded like *nonsense*.

“According to Sun Jimin’s testimony, he did write such a prescription, but it didn’t include toad venom. Which is to say, someone went behind his back and added toad venom to the assembled ingredients. Alas, due to the encounter at the gate, the packets were mixed up, and Lady Chen was killed instead. Upon learning what had happened, Cui-san was

terrified. He quickly had someone destroy the original prescription, then mimicked Sun Jimin's handwriting to write a new one that included the toad venom, hoping to frame him for the crime." Cui Buqu looked at Cui-san, smiling. "Am I right?"

Cui-san couldn't speak; he could only madly shake his head.

Cui Buqu turned to the pharmacy assistant, who'd begun to quiver in silence. "See that? If Cui-san doesn't plead guilty, the Cui family will let you take the fall. Do you imagine you can put your head back on once it's been chopped off?"

The assistant fell to his knees. "The boss did it!" he cried. "Sanlang was the one who added toad venom to the medicine packet. I don't know anything!"

"Why would he do that?!" asked Magistrate He.

"I don't know," said the assistant. "I… He wanted to kill the madam!"

"Were you the one who copied the doctor's handwriting?" he pressed.

"No, no! It wasn't me! He wrote the prescription and handed it to me. He warned me not to tell anyone!" The assistant kowtowed desperately to Doctor Sun. "Doctor Sun, these were the actions of a beast, but I didn't have a choice! If I lose my job at the pharmacy, my family will end up homeless!"

Doctor Sun sighed and closed his eyes, saying nothing.

The assistant magistrate soon returned from searching Cui-san's study with the constables. At his heels was Cui Fei, the eldest grandson of the Cui family. After everything the Cui family had already gone through, when the magistrates showed up at their door, Cui Yong must have realized Doctor Sun's case was more complicated than it seemed and sent Cui Fei over to listen. Upon arriving, however, Cui Fei was stopped at the door and forced to wait outside.

The assistant magistrate was an efficient man. Not only had he brought back the brushes, ink, paper, and inkstones from Cui-san's study, he'd also returned with all the scrolls and files from his desk, and even the wastepaper.

One by one, he arranged and classified the items. Cui-san's daily exercises were mostly copies of famous calligraphy from aristocratic families across various dynasties, while the papers Cui-san hadn't managed to dispose of in the waste were all copies of Doctor Sun's prescriptions.

Cui-san had been confined to Boling all these years and had spent his life amusing himself. It appeared the only hobby he excelled at was his ability to produce flawless reproductions of other people's handwriting.

Governor Yuan shook his head. "A pity. Your carelessness wasted all Lady Lu's efforts to frame someone else for the murder. Had you been a bit more prudent, you might have faked your innocence a little longer."

Cui-san's face was pale as death. He finally stopped struggling. Seeing he'd calmed down, Magistrate He ordered his gag removed, then turned sternly to Lady Lu. "My lady, do you still insist on lying? When did you realize he wished to kill you?"

Lady Lu laughed shrilly. "When the person sleeping beside you wishes to kill you, how can you fail to notice?" she said in despair. "What I said earlier is true. Yu Song, the maid who serves Lady Zhou, is my spy. That day, a series of coincidences rendered his murder attempt a failure. When I learned my medicine had been swapped with a harmless one, I knew something bad would happen to whoever had received the poison in my stead. My husband was terrified and called a confidant into his study without realizing I overheard them discussing it."

Magistrate He was furious. "You knew an innocent woman was harmed, yet not only did you fail to report it to the authorities, you helped the criminal conceal his crime!"

"A single day of marriage begets a hundred days of affection," said Lady Lu. "I always wanted to give him a chance. I thought if he saw I was loyal to him, he'd look back at me." Tears slid down her cheeks. The years had worn away her former beauty, and she wept a moment in silence. "If this incident came to light, we, the third line of the Cui family, would be done for. Our children would never be able to hold up their heads. I thought I would just help him this once…help him conceal the truth…"

"I don't need your help, you treacherous woman! You're just looking for a chance to kill Lady Zhou!" Cui-san roared, the veins bulging in his neck. "Who would believe you! You won't fool me!"

“Enough!” Cui Buqu clapped his hands thrice, still smiling without a hint of warmth. “Lady Lu, if you love him so much, when Cui-san is executed, you can follow him to the grave. You can be together in death, and we’ll all be spared this revolting scene.”

He turned to the Magistrate He. “Cui-san killed Lady Chen and her unborn child, and Lady Lu was his accomplice. How should they be charged according to the laws of Sui, and what kind of memorial will you submit? I trust you have some idea already.”

Magistrate He cupped his hands. “Worry not. I will oversee this matter with complete impartiality.”

Cui Buqu nodded. He rose to leave, and Governor Yuan followed.

“Cui-gongzi, may I have a word?” Cui Pei called after him.

“No.” Cui Buqu didn’t look back or pause in his step. Outside the county office, the Zuoyue guards were waiting with his carriage.

Governor Yuan stopped Cui Buqu. “The Yu family showed me immense kindness. Though I was gone for many years, I never forgot it for a moment. It was only much later I learned what happened to Shimei.[9] At the time I was only a simple commoner; I was no match for the Cui family, and I couldn’t avenge her.” He smiled wryly. “Perhaps in my current position, I could have put some pressure on the Cui family, but I couldn’t have achieved what you have. The young surpass the old; everything I wished to do, you’ve done. You have my sincere gratitude.”

Yuan Sansi bowed solemnly to Cui Buqu.

“He merely reaped what he sowed,” said Cui Buqu coolly. “Even I never expected Cui-san to try and kill his wife, fail, then frame someone for the attempt.”

Yuan Sansi smiled grimly. “Cui-san is no more than a great termite that’s attached itself to a massive tree. Cui-dalang is the future head of the Cui family. Once he’s convicted, the entire Cui family will be in hot water. Shimei can finally rest in peace. I wish to visit her grave and pay my respects, but as the Cui family didn’t allow her to be buried in the family cemetery, I’ve never been able to find it. May I ask Cui-gongzi to show me the way?”

Cui Buqu nodded. “Come with me.”

His quick response surprised Yuan Sansi. Considering the ruthlessness he’d just displayed, Yuan Sansi had assumed he’d hold a grudge against him for failing to return to avenge the Yu family.

The grave wasn’t far by carriage. Very quickly, the two of them arrived at Lady Yu’s resting place. When Yuan Sansi saw the simple, almost crude gravestone, he asked, “Do you plan on relocating her? I can help find a place with excellent feng shui, or we can reinter her at the Yu family cemetery. I believe Shimei would be happy to be with her parents again.”

“Nothing remains after death, much like a flame that has been extinguished,” Cui Buqu said indifferently. “The idea of spirits in heaven is just a construct people use to deceive and comfort themselves. Her life was difficult; nothing can change that fact. What’s the point of doing any of that when she won’t even be aware of it? If you had followed through with the engagement rather than leaving without a word of farewell, she’d have married you. That would surely have been better than marrying Cui-er.”

Yuan Sansi squatted next to the brazier set before the grave. He fed the paper money he’d bought on the way into it, burning it piece by piece. The firelight threw half his face into shadow and swallowed up his words.

The flames danced before him.

For a brief moment, he imagined Yu Mo’s spirit giving him some hint or comfort through the flames. But in the end, he had to admit that Cui Buqu was right. Yu Mo was dead. Everything else was meaningless self-deception. She didn’t need any hollow reparations. What she needed, he would never be able to give her.

“All these years, I’ve remained unmarried,” he said, voice hoarse. It seemed as if he spoke to Lady Yu and Cui Buqu both.

“Because you’re a descendant of the Wei dynasty’s imperial Yuan clan?” asked Cui Buqu. “Or because you’re carrying information about a certain treasure in addition to the burden of restoring your nation?”

Yuan Sansi’s head jerked up in shock. “You! You…” His voice rose, then dropped abruptly, unsteady in his surprise.

Cui Buqu stood with his hands behind his back and looked at him in silence, almost as if he hadn’t spoken at all.

“Of course,” said Yuan Sansi, putting the pieces together. “You’re in charge of the Zuoyue Bureau. Naturally, you know everything. And if you know, the emperor must too. Did you come to Boling under orders to arrest me?” His smile was more wretched than tears would have been. “If I told you I’ve never had any designs on the throne, would you believe me?”

“And if I told you I haven’t yet reported this to the emperor, would you believe me?”

The two of them regarded each other in silence. Then Yuan Sansi collapsed to the ground, sitting back and wiping cold sweat from his brow. “You scared me half to death!”

“I didn’t think Governor Yuan would be so timid.”

“Anyone carrying a secret like that for decades would be paranoid, all right?”

After the Han dynasty had come the Three Kingdoms era, which in turn had been followed by the Wei and Jin. The unification of the Central Plains under the Jin dynasty had been short-lived. The Western Jin dynasty moved eastward and became the Eastern Jin dynasty, but by that point, it only occupied a small territory in the southern Central Plains. Another large chunk split into sixteen separatist regimes, collectively known as the Sixteen Kingdoms and the Eastern Jin dynasty.

Those long divided must one day unite. As they made war on each other, the various small states eventually coalesced into two separate nations, forming the northern and southern dynasties that would carry on to the present. One of them, the Wei dynasty founded by the Yuan clan, was a predecessor to the current Sui dynasty.

Few people wished to remember the turmoil of those times. The downfall of the Wei dynasty was like that of any decaying regime, a parade of officials usurping the throne and emperors moving the location of the capital. Yuan Sansi, however, was a legitimate heir to the Yuan family and a descendant of Yuan Xiu, Emperor Xiaowu of Wei.

“By my generation, the power of the Yuan family had waned. Though some members still served as court officials, it made no difference. Before I

was taken in by the Yu family, my father, who was gravely ill, summoned me to his deathbed. He told me the Yuan family had a hidden trove of treasure filled with gold, silver, and armor. It was meant for future uprisings. Even if it won't be put to use in my generation or the next, I must still pass down the secret. It is the will of our Yuan family ancestors, and I cannot betray them."

He sighed. "It was such a huge secret to suddenly learn. I was constantly anxious. When I was with the Yu family, despite my master's careful guidance, and despite Shimu[10] and Shimei's warmth, my heart was heavy. I didn't dare tell anyone what I had learned. One day, my master said he wished to betroth Shimei to me. After much thought, I decided I had to leave. I was afraid that someday, someone would learn of the treasure and hunt me down. Setting aside my own fate, no one in Shimei's family would have been safe. If Shimei married me and we had a child, there would have been one more person in the world forced to bear the burden of this secret."

"Fickle and mistrustful rulers have existed since the dawn of time," said Cui Buqu. "You're afraid that if you reveal this secret, the emperor will suspect you have something up your sleeve. He'll never fully trust you. You would have to watch your back at all times."

"Correct," said Yuan Sansi. "You are close to the emperor, so you're familiar with his thinking. All powerful people are the same. If I say nothing, at least I have a glimmer of hope. But I didn't expect that, despite my efforts, you'd already know everything."

"Someone sold you out. A man who had saved your life when you were at your most wretched. You became sworn brothers, as close as true siblings. Once, when you were drunk, you let the existence of the Yuan family's treasure trove slip, and he remembered. Much later, he offended someone in the jianghu and sought refuge at Liuli Palace. There, he met my master and shared this secret with him."

Yuan Sansi smiled wryly. "I'd guessed it was him. I haven't touched a drop of alcohol since that day."

"At first it was just something I happened to know," said Cui Buqu. "It wasn't until you arrived in Boling and investigated your background that I connected you to the hidden treasure of the Yuan clan."

Yuan Sansi remained quiet for a moment. “I’ve never gone to see if the treasure is really there. I can give you the location and the clue, but out of consideration for Shimei, can I ask that you not mention me in your report to His Majesty?”

Cui Buqu nodded. “I won’t mention you.”

Yuan Sansi breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you very much.” He fed the last of the paper money into the brazier and stood, patting life back into his legs. “Please rest assured. Now that I’m serving as an official in Boling, I’ll visit Shimei often and send people to look after her grave. I won’t let Cui-san cause any more trouble.” He laughed bitterly. “That’s the most I can do for her now.”

“I’ll come find you later,” said Cui Buqu. “I wish to remain here a little longer.”

Yuan Sansi sighed, patted Cui Buqu’s shoulder, and took his leave. Only the coachman and two Zuoyue guards remained. They kept their distance, leaving Cui Buqu undisturbed.

He crouched and took out his handkerchief, painstakingly wiping the gravestone clean. His face was blank, his patience infinite. He didn’t hurry, even as afternoon dimmed to dusk.

The world contained many so-called fools like Lady Yu and Sun Jimin. They were kind and helped others, yet they lacked the strength to protect themselves. Cui Buqu wasn’t like them. His heart was stone and his mind was cunning. He could help those kind fools slay all the jackals, wolves, tigers, and leopards of the world. He’d eradicate all the thorns that grew in the darkness.

Cui Buqu smiled coldly. “Go. Reincarnate well. In your next life”—his voice dropped to a whisper—“don’t be my mother.”

The moment he finished speaking, a length of silk hair ribbon dropped down before his eyes. It was light blue and inexplicably familiar.

Cui Buqu looked up.

Cloaked in the last glow of twilight, a handsome face hung upside down between the branches of the tree. Feng Xiao smiled. “Oh, my good brother! Fancy meeting you here!”

# Chapter 108

FENG XIAO DEFTLY unhooked his foot from the branch and righted himself as he jumped back down to the ground. He was again the graceful and carefree Deputy Chief Feng, as if what Cui Buqu had just seen had been an illusion.

“I never knew Deputy Chief Feng had the vulgar habit of eavesdropping,” said Cui Buqu coldly. “If you’re discharged from the Jiejian Bureau someday, you can become a cat burglar and go around clambering over roofs and walls. I trust you’d be extraordinarily rich and comfortable.”

“But I wasn’t eavesdropping,” said Feng Xiao with a look of surprise. “I was listening openly, it’s just that neither of you happened to notice. That can’t be called eavesdropping. And I never imagined you cared so much about me. You’ve even given thought to my future livelihood! How about this: When you find the treasure, share half with me and I’ll pretend it never happened.”

Cui Buqu coughed. “When I find the treasure, I’ll report it to the court and surrender it to the national treasury. You can ask His Majesty for half yourself.”

Feng Xiao rapped his fan against his palm. “Now I understand. When you told me about your past and mentioned Yuan Sansi, you were hoping I’d drop my guard. That way I wouldn’t question how you and Yuan Sansi knew each other, and you could keep the treasure hidden from me.”

Cui Buqu was expressionless. “Yes.”

“What a lie!” Feng Xiao smiled and took Cui Buqu by the shoulder, ignoring his look of cold rejection as he pulled him forward. “You just wanted someone to talk to. No matter how high one climbs, one can’t escape loneliness. In your eyes, I was the man most qualified to listen. Say no more! I understand completely!”

Speechless, Cui Buqu lifted his eyes to the sky. Perhaps his voice had been too quiet and Feng-er hadn’t heard him. Or perhaps there was

something wrong with that man’s ears, that he only heard what he wanted to hear.

After his long conversation with Yuan Sansi, his head had begun to throb again. He didn’t bother to reply but turned and made his way back to the carriage so he could lie down for a while. Yet just as he was about to step up, someone darted in ahead of him.

Cui Buqu’s expression turned ugly.

Feng Xiao massaged his leg and sighed. “You two talked for so long. I waited in that tree until my legs were sore. What are you standing there for? Come on, don’t make the coachman wait! He’s been standing there half the day, and it’s hard on him too. Daoist Master Cui should show him some consideration!”

Cui Buqu glanced at the coachman’s fearful expression. His mouth twitched; slowly, he began to climb into the carriage.

Feng Xiao smiled and reached to pull him up, only to receive a hard slap to the side of the head. He gave an exaggerated yelp of pain. “Why do I even try? I was only worried you’d fall.”

It’d have been better if Feng Xiao had said nothing at all. Now that he had, it was like a jinx. Last night’s rain had made the ground slippery, and as Cui Buqu pulled himself up, he stumbled. Fortunately, he grabbed the side of the carriage just in time to avoid falling flat on his face.

Feng Xiao burst out laughing.

Now Cui Buqu was even less inclined to talk. But even if he didn’t, he couldn’t stop Feng Xiao. Unless the man’s mouth was sewn shut, his annoying blather would never cease. “When you said you were going to Boling, I saw how serious Qiao Xian’s injuries were, and that Zhangsun had to remain to oversee things in the capital. I knew you had no one dependable to accompany you, so I came myself to ensure your safety…”

“Did you get Yuyin?” Cui Buqu cut in.

Feng Xiao was in high spirits. “And more! Your grandfather offered me his granddaughter as a concubine.”

“Congratulations, Deputy Chief Feng,” Cui Buqu said gloomily. “Apparently good things come in twos.”

Feng Xiao leaned in closer. “Considering how desperate Cui Yong was and the way he was clutching at me like a lifeline, I daresay he’d have agreed even if I asked to marry his wife.”

Cui Buqu couldn’t suppress the twitch of his mouth, and Feng Xiao spotted it immediately. “If you want to laugh,” he said modestly, “you should laugh. No one’s stopping you. Why hold back?”

“Cui-dalang colluded with the Southern dynasty and committed the serious crime of treason. Even if His Majesty shows some lenience in deference to the Cui clan, Cui-dalang won’t keep his position as the future head of the family. If he wants to save himself, he’ll need to make some tough decisions. Meanwhile, Cui-san has taken innocent lives through this poisoning scheme; he won’t escape a conviction of murder. The whole family’s a heap of misfortune from top to bottom. Though Jiuniang is of the third line, she’s still part of the main clan.” Cui Buqu sneered. “What made Cui Yong believe she would be enough to buy your intercession?

“If a person sits at the top for too long,” he continued, “guarding their little plot of land with no one to challenge them, their minds will inevitably narrow. Cui-da was full of lofty ambition, hoping to secure another path to glory for the main family and afford them centuries of continued prosperity. Unfortunately he went about it completely the wrong way.”

Feng Xiao smiled and changed the topic. “I was sure Daoist Master Cui wouldn’t travel thousands of miles to the Cui family just for revenge. It turned out you were investigating Cui-da’s treason while secretly meeting Yuan Sansi and persuading him to hand over the treasure. You intentionally used Yuyin to distract me. All these layers of meticulous plotting—had I been a little less careful, I really might have foolishly walked down the path you paved for me.”

Daoist Master Cui flashed him a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Didn’t your lordship find another path in the end? Up a tree, no less!”

Feng Xiao was as thick-skinned as ever; he wasn’t embarrassed in the least. “Looks like I understand you all too well. So why don’t we do it again?”

Cui Buqu frowned. “Do what again?”

“Work together, of course. The hiding place of this treasure is sure to be filled with hidden traps. Even if you were the world’s smartest man, you’d still have difficulty making your way through. But with me there, it’s another story!”

Cui Buqu sighed. “Perhaps I might die in the traps without you. But if I bring you along, I expect you’ll push me into them.”

Feng Xiao laughed loudly. “How could I? I’d be so lonely without you!”

Cui Buqu’s lip curled. “Before we met, how did your subordinates tolerate you?”

“You mean Pei Jingzhe?” Feng Xiao shrugged. “He’s the one who travels with me most often. The boy’s a bit thick. Eight out of ten times, he doesn’t even react to my teasing. He’s no fun at all.”

So Feng Xiao had latched onto Cui Buqu because he was more fun? Cui Buqu’s head throbbed violently. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “We can’t stay with the Cui family now. I sent someone to look for an inn. I’ll tidy up the case over the next two days and wait for someone from the capital to come take over. Then we can go look for the treasure.”

Feng Xiao was surprised. “Cui-da is suspected of treason and Cui-san of murder, while Cui-er is long dead. Misfortune has befallen three of Cui Yong’s four sons. As for the fourth, Cui Pei… Lady Yu entrusted you to this man on her deathbed, but he dared not disobey his father. To a degree, he’s complicit in the attempts on your life. Are you going to let him go?”

Cui Buqu propped his head on his hand. “All debts have their debtors. He’s only guilty of not doing his utmost; he never tried to harm me himself. Without that scrap of kindness from him twenty-some years ago, I’d have died many times over. I’ll let him go this time; we’re even. All this jostling is making me ill. I’m going to lie down for a bit; let me know when we arrive.”

He lay down with his back to Feng Xiao. In the next moment, he felt the jade pin pulled from his dark hair, sending it scattering over his shoulders.

Cui Buqu was about to turn and glare, but a hand was already at his temple, pressing down and gently massaging the acupoint. The touch

alternated between hard and soft, and internal energy became heat that streamed through his meridians into his scalp.

Qiao Xian had always been the one to do these things. Without her around, all he could do was clutch his head and wait for his migraines to pass. But now his eyes fluttered shut, and he forgot the harsh words that had been on the tip of his tongue.

Feng Xiao's disdainful voice rose behind him. "Did you even wash your hair yesterday? Ah, right. I used the carriage's bedding at the relay station. Once we get to this new inn, make sure you tell them to change it. I don't want to be using the same set when we leave the city. Really you should buy another set as backup…"

*Forget it,* Cui Buqu told himself. He'd let Feng Xiao make a racket if he got his head massage. *May heavenly blessings be with you*—Cui Buqu recited this calming mantra to himself over and over while pretending that Feng Xiao's voice was the chirping of birds outside, which lifted his mood quite a bit.

Soon, Feng Xiao felt Cui Buqu's shoulders relax and his breathing slow and lengthen. He'd fallen asleep.

Feng Xiao withdrew his hand and studied the gentle curve of Cui Buqu's defenseless back. *This man is cold to the core. Even his bones are cold and hard and pointy. He forgets he possesses a heart that's soft and warm.*

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Cui Buqu woke feeling more rested than he'd been in a long time. His headache had evaporated, and even the discomfort that'd plagued him the last few days had abated somewhat. All that remained was confusion about what day it was until he sat up and saw the decor. Suddenly he remembered—

"What time is it? Is this an inn?"

"What else would it be? You slept like a log. I had to carry you inside."

Feng Xiao was sitting at a nearby table enjoying a private feast. An array of piping-hot dishes were spread before him, their savory aroma permeating the entire room. Cui Buqu was sure it was the scent of the food that'd woken him. Cui Buqu stared at him. "Why aren't you eating in your own room?"

Feng Xiao didn't look up. "The smell gets into my blankets and pillows, and if any crumbs land on them, rats will come skulking around at night. All that can be avoided if I eat here."

Cui Buqu said nothing. Feng Xiao raised his head and regarded him with confusion. "Don't just lie there. Come and eat. If you're not hungry, I'll finish off the rest."

Finally Cui Buqu sighed and bent to pull on his boots. He took a seat opposite Feng Xiao.

"Cui Pei came to see you." Feng Xiao spoke with a sarcastic edge. "Apparently the Cui family hasn't quite given up on their fantasies."

"Did he come to plead for Cui-da?"

"No, they've gotten a bit wiser than that. They know Cui-da's crimes are unpardonable; there's nothing they can do to save him, and they dare not plead on his behalf. However, they want you to be merciful and let Cui Fei go."

Cui Buqu showed no surprise. "Oh? The eldest grandson, the one Cui Yong claims to be most outstanding?"

Feng Xiao smiled. "It's true he's the eldest grandson. But if you were willing to recognize your clan and ancestors, his most outstanding grandson would be you."

A faint smile crept over Cui Buqu's face. "So it's on this that they've placed their hopes."

"At this point, forget demanding Lady Yu be buried next to Cui-er. If you told them you wanted to be the next head of the Cui clan, they'd agree."

Cui Buqu gave a brittle laugh and didn't reply. It was clear from the sound alone that he had no interest in the Cui clan of Boling. In fact, he was probably coming up with more ways to torment them.

“Your laugh is scaring me.” Feng Xiao rolled his eyes, then smiled brightly as he dropped a shiitake mushroom into Cui Buqu’s bowl. “But now that I’ve heard the story of the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, would you like me to even the score by telling you my own?”

“Not interested.” Cui Buqu lowered his head and applied himself to his meal.

“Don’t be like that. I really want to tell you. But it’s true I have no tales from my youth about seeking revenge for bullying or other mistreatment. I was born to a wealthy family and lacked for nothing. I was an adorable child and fair as jade; everyone loved me, and when I walked down the street, countless young maidens would turn and stare at me. One time—”

“Shut up. I don’t want to hear this.”

Feng Xiao carried on as if he hadn’t heard. “One time, I caught the eye of some kidnappers who trafficked in children. They took advantage of the massive crowds at the Lantern Festival to drug me—of course, I was only pretending to be unconscious because I wanted to see their hideout. As it turned out, when bystanders saw them attempt to abduct me, they came rushing to my rescue, and those young maidens’ delicate fists beat those kidnappers to death. Hah! You see, when someone is handsome enough to shake the heavens and move the hearts of both gods and ghosts, they become truly invincible. There was another time…”

Cui Buqu couldn’t choke down another bite. His heart was dark with despair. Oh how he wished lightning would crack down from the heavens and strike this oleander spirit dead!

# Chapter 109

PERHAPS HIS EARS had been damaged from all the torment. After that meal, Cui Buqu spent the entire night dreaming of Feng Xiao.

In the dream there was only darkness, with no sun or moon in sight. There was only Feng Xiao, bounding about in high spirits, saying in his melodious voice: “One time… Another time…”

Those words rang in his ears until he woke, stubborn and clinging as willow catkins in spring. They stuck to him like the catkins stuck to his clothes, impossible to dislodge and terribly vexing.

He woke in a daze and rose to dress. He was in the middle of pulling on his boots when there was a knock at the door. Cui Buqu seriously considered jumping out the window and making his escape. Fortunately, a voice on the other side of the door saved him from the tragedy of falling from the second floor and breaking his legs.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Cui-gongzi. I was wondering if you’re free to talk? If you aren’t, I’ll come back later.” It was Cui Pei.

Cui Buqu breathed a sigh of relief. “Go to the neighboring teahouse and reserve a room. I’ll join you shortly.”

Cui Pei responded in affirmation, and the sound of his footsteps faded into the distance.

A morning without Feng-er was a beautiful thing—as long as Cui Buqu ignored last night’s leftovers still sitting on the table. Feng Xiao’s fastidiousness had reached such heights that Cui Buqu had to bow to him in defeat. Who else would train themselves to use the zither as a weapon, all so they could drive off their opponent with sound waves and internal energy rather than having to touch them?

No one but Feng-er.

Yet Feng Xiao had been willing to carry Cui Buqu out of the carriage and into the inn. This was an unprecedented degree of generosity.

The smell of their discarded meal hung in the air, none too pleasant. Cui Buqu quickened his steps and left, unwilling to stay a moment longer.

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In the teahouse, Cui Pei was restless.

If a few days ago someone had told him Cui Jie was not only alive but held the Cui family's fate in his hands, he would have thought it absurd. In his memories, that child had always been silent. Even when he was ill from the abuse he suffered, he'd never complained or tattled to Cui Pei. Later, when Cui Pei had his own children and experienced what it meant to be a father, he looked back on his nephew with a gnawing guilt.

In just two days, the Cui family had undergone a series of earth-shattering changes. The clan was like a ship swaying in a typhoon, battered by waves and in danger of capsizing at any moment. There wasn't a single member of the family who was unaffected. The women spent their days weeping. Other members cursed Cui Buqu, wishing a terrible death on him. Cui Pei knew Cui Buqu wouldn't take their vitriol to heart; the moment he'd left the Cui family, he'd severed all connection to them.

The imperial verdict had yet to be issued. Cui Yong had written to the Lu clan of Fanyang, asking them to write a letter of appeal. Cui Pei had no idea if this would have any effect. Since Cui Pei was the only son of the Cui family who'd emerged unscathed, as well as the man Lady Yu had entrusted her helpless son to, it made sense that Cui Yong had sent him to beg for clemency.

Cui Yong had urged Cui Pei repeatedly to choose his words carefully and avoid provoking Cui Buqu. If Cui Buqu proposed any conditions, he was to agree at once, then think them over after he got back. Cui Pei smiled bitterly at the memory. He wasn't afraid of any conditions Cui Buqu might propose. What he feared was that Cui Buqu wouldn't propose any conditions at all.

The Cui clan of Boling was one of the famed noble families everyone flocked to. Many with the surname Cui schemed to get close to them,

hoping to borrow some of their reputation. But such temptations didn't work on Cui Buqu.

"I brought you with me because you were the first to meet Cui-gongzi and his companion outside the city," Cui Pei reminded the girl at his side. "You have a rapport with them. If you need to kneel and plead with him, don't hesitate. But you must not speak unless I say so."

"I understand." Cui-jiuniang's face was tight with unease. In a single night, her father had become a murderer and her mother had become his accomplice. Both were now in prison. Cui-jiuniang and her siblings had come crashing down from where they sat among the clouds into the harsh dust of the world. They'd spent the day at a loss, filled with anxiety.

She wanted to hate Cui Buqu, but when she saw his tall, slender figure enter the room, she couldn't muster any resentment. Instead she felt a jumble of conflicting emotions, impossible to express.

Cui Buqu's face was as indifferent as it'd been the day they'd met. There was no sign that he felt anything when he saw them.

"I hope you're not here to plead for leniency," he said.

"How could we dare to, at this point? I came today because…I wanted to see you. That's all." Cui Pei's mouth twisted in a wry smile.

Cui Buqu inclined his head, waiting for him to continue. But Cui Pei didn't know what to say. He was over fifty years old, and he'd traveled all across the land—even met the emperor himself. Yet at this moment, he felt terribly self-conscious.

"I betrayed my sister-in-law's trust." He weighed his words carefully, fearing to provoke Cui Buqu. "I know you feel resentment toward us, and it's true that the Cui family has done you a great wrong. Father himself is filled with regret."

Cui Buqu suddenly smiled. "If I'd died back then, would Cui Yong have been filled with regret?"

Cui Pei was speechless. Of course his father would have felt no regret. All the way until his brother's arrest, his father had only regretted not decisively killing Cui Buqu in his childhood. He hadn't felt the slightest remorse at not treating him better. Cui Pei's heart sank; there were no words

he could say to justify himself. He sighed. “Is there anything I can do? If you wish to move my sister-in-law’s grave to the Cui family cemetery…”

“She was never buried,” said Cui Buqu. “What is there to move?”

It was impossible to continue the conversation. Another man might have overturned the table in rage, but Cui Pei had always been meek. No matter what Cui Buqu said, he accepted it all. “It’s my fault. If I had been more resolute…”

“Do you want to be the head of the Cui family?” Cui Buqu asked.

Cui Pei jerked his head up and met his eyes.

Cui Buqu smiled meaningfully. “You had three older brothers ahead of you, all legitimate. Your turn would never have come. But things are different now. Even if the rest of the Cui family can avoid being implicated by Cui-da’s actions and save themselves, no one will accept any of your brothers as their leader. But there’s still hope for you.”

“I’ve never thought about it,” said Cui Pei weakly.

“Strength is required to protect yourself and the people you care about. Now that the main lines of descent have collapsed, if you don’t take a stand, you’ll give the world a chance to trample you.”

Cui Pei remained silent, but Cui Buqu knew he’d taken his words to heart.

This fourth son of the Cui family was a talented man, but his father and brothers had always been above him in status. As the years passed, he hadn’t been able to make anything of himself. Though he’d gained some small fame as a scholar out in the world, whenever people spoke of him, they always appended the line *he comes from the Cui clan of Boling.*

Cui Buqu had found a way out, but Cui Pei had not. He was destined to be bound by those words, *the Cui clan of Boling*, all his life.

Honor was at times a shackle.

Another figure slipped into the room—a servant from the commandery governor’s residence.

“Cui-langjun,” he said. “Our lord wishes to invite you to his residence when you’re free.”

Cui Buqu nodded. “I’ll go now.”

Cui Pei knew the conversation was over. Quickly he said, “I’ll visit my sister-in-law’s grave regularly to look after it. While you’re out in the world, be sure to take care of yourself!”

He took a prescription from his sleeve and handed it to Cui Buqu. “You must know that longstanding noble families like ours always keep a couple of secret medicinal recipes. I can tell your health is poor. This is a prescription I found at the manor. It can help adjust the workings of your body; Doctor Sun has already reviewed it.” He added, awkward, “I know you lack for nothing in your current position. But if you ever need anything, just write to me. I’ll do my best to help.”

Cui Buqu hesitated, but accepted the prescription. Cui Pei breathed a sigh of relief. Talking to his nephew was more stressful than meeting the emperor.

“Please think carefully about what I said,” said Cui Buqu. “If you succeed your father as head of the Cui clan, I might consider appealing to His Majesty on your behalf. Perhaps the innocent women and children of the Cui clan will be spared.” He glanced at Cui-jiuniang. “And Cui Yong won’t need to give Cui-jiuniang to Feng Xiao as his concubine.”

Cui-jiuniang was incredulous. “Did Grandfather really offer that?” She looked at Cui Pei, who averted his gaze.

“Cui-gongzi.” Cui-jiuniang called to Cui Buqu as he began to leave. She finally asked the words she’d been holding back: “Are you really who they say you are? Are you my brother?”

Cui Buqu didn’t stop walking. “Even if the Cui family isn’t completely finished, they’ve suffered a grievous blow,” he said blandly. “You wanted to learn medicine from Sun Jimin; here is your opportunity. Don’t be all talk and no action, like women who spend all day fretting, too afraid to do anything. I don’t wish to disdain you.”

Cui-jiuniang’s face twisted. Just as Cui Pei feared she would surge forward and begin interrogating Cui Buqu, she fell to her knees and pressed her forehead to the ground. “I’m sorry.”

Cui Buqu paused.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Cui-jiuniang again. “I heard about what happened to you. I have no right to speak for my parents, but I was born their daughter, and I cannot escape responsibility for how they treated you. And after what they’ve done now, I know I can’t plead on their behalf. I can only apologize and ask you to live happily from now on, free from all difficulties and hardships.”

Her lips parted again, as if to call him *Brother*, but the word evaporated on her tongue.

Once Cui Buqu had gone, Cui Pei stepped forward and helped her up. He sighed at the sight of the tears streaming down her face. “Why do this to yourself?”

“I know I should hate him.” Cui-jiuniang had rubbed her eyes red, but her tears wouldn’t stop. “But whenever I think about how I was pampered from birth while he was suffering, wandering heaven knows where, I can’t.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Cui Pei morosely.

“But he didn’t do anything to us,” said Cui-jiuniang. “Though he came back and arrested Uncle and Father, he had a reason for it. He didn’t do it just to punish us. And yet everyone in the Cui family is cursing him behind his back. I… For some reason, my heart aches.”

Cui Pei patted her head and said nothing.

Perhaps in Cui-jiuniang, Cui Buqu had seen a sliver of warmth in the Cui family, and that was why he hadn’t dealt them the fatal blow. Or perhaps it’d been for the sake of the deceased Lady Yu and Cui-er. Whatever the case, this was the best outcome they could hope for.

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Cui Buqu let himself be guided into the rear garden of the commandery governor’s residence, where he came upon Feng Xiao and Yuan Sansi chatting and laughing together. They seemed to get on swimmingly, practically about to swear vows of brotherhood.

He sighed. Feng Xiao had shown no enthusiasm toward Governor Yuan previously. Yet the moment he'd learned of the secret treasure, he was on him like a weasel who'd caught the scent of fish, determined to get a bite.

When Yuan Sansi saw Cui Buqu, a smile came to his face and he stood and cupped his hands, familiar yet courteous. "Buqu. Deputy Chief Feng said you've already told him everything, and that you're preparing to search for the treasure together."

Cui Buqu shot Feng Xiao a look. *You really let no opportunity pass you by, do you?*

Feng Xiao looked back with an innocent expression, as if hadn't the slightest idea why Cui Buqu was glaring at him.

All Yuan Sansi saw was that Cui Buqu hadn't objected, so he said, "Follow me."

He led them to the study, where he removed a book from the bookshelf and fished a bamboo bookmark from between the pages. The bookmark was weathered and clearly old; upon closer examination, it seemed to be two pieces of bamboo glued together. Splitting them with a knife revealed a tiny cloth tucked inside.

Yuan Sansi carefully picked up the flimsy piece of cloth and unfolded it, revealing it to be roughly the size of half a palm. On it, a vista was depicted in special ink. There was a snow-capped mountain, and halfway up, a cave. A small stream bubbled between turquoise rocks.

Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao examined it, but couldn't tell what location the painting depicted. After all, many natural landscapes looked the same. If the Wei dynasty had really hidden a treasure trove intended for their descendants, they surely provided more than this vague lead. This didn't look like a riddle at all; it seemed more like a prank.

"This is also the first time I've opened the bookmark to see what's inside," confessed Yuan Sansi.

"Do you have any idea what the mountain is?" asked Cui Buqu.

"Yes," said Yuan Sansi with determination. "It's Mount Tiannan in Heng Province."

# Chapter 110

HENG PROVINCE CONTAINED the former capital city of Pingcheng. Before Emperor Xiaowen had relocated his capital to Luoyang, it had been the capital of the Wei dynasty for generations. Even when it was no longer the capital, several emperors had continued living there. An air of royalty remained, imparting the city with a regal qi. Today, although nowhere near as prosperous as Luoyang, it was still a major metropolis.

North of the city, everything beyond the thin lines of the official roads was forest. It was now summer, and the leaves on the trees were lush as they swayed delicately in the wind. At the foot of the mountain, beside the main road, sat a teahouse. Its thatched roof was woven from hay and cattail reeds supported on bamboo poles, and it sheltered a small area of spread mats without even a table. A teahouse like this was only meant as a small rest stop for passing woodcutters and hunters before they entered the mountains.

A woodcutter stood outside it at a bit of a loss. It was rare to meet anyone here, much less four people taking up all the cattail mats. As he tried to walk around them, one of the strangers called out.

“Sir, please wait!” A Zuoyue guard approached with a bowl of steaming tea.

They’d purchased the hot tea and bowls outside the city. Cui Buqu loathed extravagant purchases and had been adamantly against spending on new bowls. Naturally, Feng Xiao had footed the bill.

The woodcutter accepted the tea. Bewildered, he asked, “Do your lordships wish to hike up the mountain?”

He’d noticed that two of them were better dressed than the others and surmised they were young masters of a wealthy family who had come out to enjoy themselves. He remarked, glancing up at the sky, “It looks like a storm’s coming. I’d suggest you wait before going up the mountain.”

The Zuoyue guard smiled. “Thank you very much for the warning. But we’d like to ask you something. Is there a Mount Tiannan around here

somewhere?”

The woodcutter was about to shake his head, then checked himself. “Ah, there is a mountain—we locals call it Ruyi Mountain. But one of the scholars in the county told me it has another name, Tian-something. I can’t remember. It might be the mountain you’re talking about.”

“Where is this mountain?” asked the Zuoyue guard.

The woodcutter pointed straight ahead. “It’s that one!”

Everyone followed his pointing finger. Behind the mountain before them jutted a second peak. It was quite a bit taller than the mountains around it, its summit shrouded in mist like the hidden abode of immortals.

Feng Xiao looked at Cui Buqu, who shook his head slightly—he wasn’t sure either.

The woodcutter finished his tea, then watched as the group rose and bade him farewell. When they started walking in the direction of the mountain, he warned them again. “The mountain roads will be slippery from the rain. It’s no joke!”

Feng Xiao smiled. “So we need to hurry up the mountain before the rain arrives. Thank you.”

He walked in front, fanning himself, while Cui Buqu walked with one guard in front and one guard behind for protection. A carriage was no good in terrain like this. Cui Buqu grabbed a length of bamboo to use as a walking stick and followed Feng Xiao up the mountain trail, albeit at a markedly slower pace.

The woodcutter watched their retreating backs in astonishment. They hadn’t listened to his advice at all. He shook his head and sighed. “Young people these days.” Then he picked up his basket and axe and trudged off toward another slope.

He couldn’t have known that at that very moment, Feng Xiao was saying to Cui Buqu, “Dark clouds overhead. Are you sure there’ll be no rain today?”

Cui Buqu’s lashes fluttered. He didn’t raise his head. “It won’t rain here.”

He’d hardly spoken when a strong gust of wind buffeted them. Cui Buqu was standing at a turn in the mountain path and almost lost his footing. He was on the verge of being blown right off when Feng Xiao grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back, faster even than the Zuoyue guards beside him. Feng Xiao didn’t hesitate to mock him. “In my opinion, you should go back down the mountain and wait for us. You’re nothing but a burden!”

Cui Buqu paid him no heed. He squinted up the mountainside before pointing in another direction. “Let’s go up there and take a look.”

Sure enough, the dark clouds were swiftly blown over to the neighboring peak. Rain fell in the west, but in the east the sun shone and the sky above their heads was bright and clear. How had Cui Buqu cultivated such a skill? Feng Xiao was shocked he could accurately discern the weather from such a distance.

It was a hard road to their destination, and the climb was particularly agonizing for Cui Buqu. His face was as white as paper, and he needed to rest every few steps. Feng Xiao was beginning to think the next gust might scatter him to the four winds.

When they arrived, they discovered a cave entrance concealed beneath the luxuriant canopy of a tree. The cave was deep—even the glare of the summer sun couldn’t penetrate the darkness.

The clue Yuan Sansi had shared with them was many years old, and the woods now were much denser than in the painting. It should have been near-impossible for anyone to tell at a glance if this spot was truly the hiding place of the Wei dynasty’s secret treasure.

“How could you tell?” Feng Xiao asked curiously.

“This mountain has a unique shape,” said Cui Buqu. He produced the little picture and pointed to the mountain within it, then pointed at his feet. “Did you notice? Though the mountain is steep, the path we took was not. We encountered no danger on our way.”

“Except when you almost fell off,” Feng Xiao reminded him.

Cui Buqu turned a deaf ear and continued. “On our way up, I noticed faint ruts in the stones of the path—evidence that it was built for the easy transport of building materials by soldiers and craftsmen.”

He asked the Zuoyue guards to push aside the nearby stones and cut away some of the foliage screening the entrance. As they worked, he wiped away some of the sand on the ground with his foot, revealing a few deep grooves, too regular to be the result of wind or rain.

Feng Xiao crouched down and ran his fingers over them. “Deep and uniform. Something was dragged across the ground.”

Cui Buqu looked around. “They must have searched for a long time before they found this place. It’s halfway up a mountain, yet the surrounding terrain is gentle. They transported tools up the mountain and carved out the interior, then let the dense vegetation conceal the exterior. It’s difficult to discover; even if passing woodcutters or hunters saw the cave entrance, they wouldn’t be likely to enter. And if they were curious enough to go in…” He paused. “There’s a high chance they wouldn’t come back out.”

Feng Xiao arched a brow. “Are you sure there’s hidden treasure in such a small space? How would one even bring all that armor out through such a narrow entrance? Did Emperor Wei not consider such things? Perhaps Yuan Sansi deceived you.”

Cui Buqu shook his head. “I’ve had Yuan Sansi’s background thoroughly investigated. There’s no mistake, something’s inside. Let’s go take a look.”

The Zuoyue guards led the way. Cui Buqu had set to rolling up his sleeves in preparation for entering when Feng Xiao suddenly grabbed his wrist, his gaze flickering with something obscure. “You can wait for us outside. Look how sick you are; won’t I just waste my energy saving you?”

With a sigh, Cui Buqu said, “Do you think I’m going in there just to be a burden? There are undoubtedly hidden traps inside. I might not be an expert on traps, but I know a thing or two. Without me, it won’t matter how powerful a martial artist you are, you won’t make it out unscathed.”

Feng Xiao’s usual languid smile quickly returned. He leaned in, closing the distance between them. “Daoist Master Cui, are you worried about me?”

“I am,” said Cui Buqu indifferently. “After all, keeping Deputy Chief Feng alive is crucial to my safety on the way back.”

The Zuoyue guards had already disappeared into the mouth of the cave; Cui Buqu turned away and followed suit.

The moment he entered, the air pressed in on him, gloomy and damp, as if he’d stepped into another world entirely. The darkness was so complete that he couldn’t see his own hand before his face, and the ground under his feet was slick with moisture. If he wasn’t careful, he’d slip and fall.

Squinting ahead, he called out, “Don’t touch the walls!”

# Chapter 111

"TRY TO STAY in the middle. Don't touch the walls!" Cui Buqu repeated.

"What is that?" The lichen-covered walls sparkled with silver, captivating yet uncanny. Feng Xiao studied them by the light of the torch one of the guards carried. "It's quite beautiful."

"It's a residue produced by the caterpillars of the silver dust butterfly," said Cui Buqu. "The butterflies live in the dark, and the silver scales on their wings glow. Though their bodies aren't poisonous, the scales on their wings are."

"Are they commonly found in damp caves?"

Cui Buqu saw what he was getting at. He shook his head before remembering Feng Xiao was up ahead and couldn't see him. "Silver dust butterflies are usually found in the southwest," he murmured. "They're rare here in the north. But they live in swarms and their lifespans are short; I doubt there're more of them after this passage."

Then this was only the first trap. This toxic silver dust was likely nothing compared to the dangers that lurked ahead.

A rush of damp, stale air hit Cui Buqu full in the face and made him cough. The sound echoed through the passage, bouncing back at him from the far walls. As they walked, the ground beneath his feet gradually leveled out and was no longer as slippery. His bamboo walking stick thudded dully against the stone, the sound reverberating through their hearts like that of a monk striking a temple block.

They reached the end of the passage, and the cave opened up before them. Vines dangled from above, so low they could almost reach up to touch them. A gentle draft was blowing in from somewhere, caressing their cheeks with the cold damp of the cave.

Cui Buqu scented danger. He looked down at his feet.

The light of the torch revealed the stone tiles to be free of lichen. Beneath a scattering of dust and sand were engraved patterns: resplendent peonies and intricate lotus vines.

Treasure troves like these were usually no more than fanciful contingency plans left by an emperor for his descendants. There was no need to go to the trouble of paving the floor and carving the tiles with patterns. Clearly Emperor Wei hadn't intended this cave to be merely a storehouse for relics. He must have anticipated that if his descendants one day needed to flee here, they would temporarily—

He froze. "Back up!"

Feng Xiao reacted first. He leapt backward, grabbing Cui Buqu's arm and hauling him back with him. The Zuoyue guards were a half step too slow. One felt a cold wind bearing down on his head an instant before sharp agony pierced his nose. Sharp blades shot up from the tiles, slicing off the tip of the man's nose. Blood misted the air.

Quick again, Feng Xiao struck several acupoints on the man's body to stop the bleeding, then held up the torch to take a closer look. "It's not poisoned."

The wound looked horrific, but they'd brought medicine for incised wounds. The other Zuoyue guard swiftly bandaged his companion, but the tip of his nose was gone for good.

"You leave first," said Cui Buqu. "Go down the mountain and wait for us there."

The injured Zuoyue guard refused. “Lord Chief! It’s only a flesh wound; it won’t hamper my performance.”

Feng Xiao didn’t involve himself in their conversation. He dropped to the floor and marveled at the sharp blade peeking out from the stone tile.

“A blade this sharp must have been forged using ancient methods. When we head back, remind me to take it with us. I’ll have it reforged into a new sword; it’ll be better than the one I used on Fo’er. But how did you know it was a trap?”

“The tiles look similar, but they’re set at different heights. The differences are regular.” Cui Buqu walked over and placed his hand on a tile patterned with lotus vines, then slowly traced a path in a clockwise direction. “Look, if we start with this tile, they get lower and lower. Then here, they return to their original height. Feel for yourself.”

“I’m not touching that; the ground is filthy. Just tell me.”

Cui Buqu silently willed away the vein throbbing in his forehead. “I’ve seen this kind of trap before. The pattern is a warning to those who belong here. But trespassers won’t recognize it, so they’ll be caught.”

Feng Xiao fanned himself. “There’s no rhyme or reason to how the patterns are arranged. I trust this was done to mislead trespassers as well?”

“Correct.” Cui Buqu looked at Feng Xiao in irritation. “It’s freezing in here. Can you stop waving that fan around?”

Feng Xiao studied Cui Buqu’s face, which was as white as snow. He shook his head. “It’s not too late for you to leave!” he mocked, but he snapped the fan shut.

Next came the sound of dripping, followed by the patter of water over their heads. An ethereal mist descended from above. As Feng Xiao stepped into the drizzle, a shapeless barrier of qi knocked the water away. His clothes remained dry.

“Rain in a cave?” He poked at the mist with his fan. “It’s not poisonous gas, is it?”

Cui Buqu shook his head. “There was dense fog around the mountain earlier. There must be another floor above, and that’s where the exit is. If

I’m not mistaken, the current floor is filled with traps as a deterrent, while the second floor will hold the treasure. The passage should be up ahead.”

The Zuoyue guard’s wound had stopped bleeding, and he insisted on staying. Cui Buqu didn’t order him to leave, so the group continued onward as four.

This time, Cui Buqu took the lead. He proceeded with excruciating slowness, pausing to observe after each step. The injured Zuoyue guard took up the rear, his companion ahead of him. They could of course have used qinggong to fly ahead. It would have been faster, but there was no guarantee they wouldn’t land in another trap. Cui Buqu’s approach took much longer, but it was also much safer.

The hanging vines grew lower and lower, blocking their view. The Zuoyue guard stepped to the front to push them aside. Stalagmites of varying sizes rose from the ground. From this, they could guess that the cave was likely a natural one. A vast and empty cave like this had infinite potential. It was large enough to house many people—perhaps even an entire royal battalion. No wonder Emperor Wei had claimed it as a secret refuge.

In such a silent cave, even the subtle rustling of leaves might set one on edge. Cui Buqu’s persistent coughs accompanied them, yet somehow, the sound soothed them instead.

This wasn’t the Zuoyue guards’ first mission. They were experienced men who had encountered their fair share of unexpected situations. The guard in front didn’t let his anxiety show. He simply followed Feng Xiao around a stalagmite. There was a bend in the path up ahead and a faint glimmer of light.

An exit?

He was delighted. But at that moment, he heard a low groan from the guard behind him. He jerked around and found nothing but empty space. “Lord Chief!” he cried. “Jiang Song is gone!”

No response.

Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao too had disappeared.

The shocked guard turned the corner, but there was still no sign of any of his companions. Even the light seemed to have been an illusion. Before him was the same deep and endless darkness, a passage leading to who knew where. The only light came from the torch he held.

After walking so long, the torch was nearly spent. The flame guttered feebly, like an old man struggling to catch his breath, fading away until the darkness finally took him.

Everything went black.

The guard reached into his lapels for another torch, but before his fingers touched it, an unseen force seized his body. It was as if he'd stepped into quicksand—first his feet were trapped, and then the rest of him was dragged down into the dark.

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Cui Buqu was still standing in place. He hadn't moved.

He hadn't fallen, and he hadn't walked too far ahead. In truth, he'd noticed something amiss the moment he'd gone around the first stalagmite. That sense of wrongness hadn't been based on any perceived threat. It was no more than a faint niggling, something he couldn't put his finger on. He'd forged ahead, hoping to spot more clues as they went.

Stalagmites thronged like trees in the cave. The torch had been unable to illuminate them all, but even within the small halo of its light, he could see there'd been many.

Was the problem with the stalagmites?

He frowned slightly, a rare trace of doubt surfacing on his features. It was unfortunate Feng Xiao was behind him and couldn't see. By now, he'd reached the fourth stalagmite.

"I think there might be a problem with the stalagmites," he called to the man behind him.

But Feng Xiao didn't respond.

He whirled around. The other three were gone.

Cui Buqu sighed. So his hunch had been right. He supported himself against the stalagmite for a moment, recalling how the cave had looked when he'd first entered.

"I made a mistake," he muttered. He'd assumed each trap was separate and self-contained. There'd been no connection between the silver dust butterflies and the stone tile traps, which seemed to have confirmed his guess. But in truth, the moment they'd entered the cave, they'd stepped into a single, enormous trap.

An Ursa Major Twin Jade Array.

As the name suggested, this array was patterned after the seven stars forming the constellation Ursa Major. Seven traps had been laid around them, and the moment they interacted with one, they'd find themselves snared within a subarray nearby. While he'd been so focused on avoiding the tile trap, he'd stepped into the subarray formed by the stalagmites.

Right now, the four of them weren't far away from each other. But as long as they were trapped in the array, they might as well be on opposite ends of the earth. They were completely out of reach, like the distant light of the stars.

The current Ursa Major subarray was based on one of the four endgame compositions in the strategy game of xiangqi, known as the Gathering of Seven Stars. Even if someone could tell this array was no ordinary one, if they didn't know the principles of its composition, they'd be rats in a trap, only able to wallow in despair.

It didn't matter who you were—young or old, alive or dead, anyone caught in the array would find themselves unable to leave.

At this moment, Cui Buqu had no way to save the others. He could only focus on saving himself. He closed his eyes, casting his mind back to the solution of this particular endgame composition. Deep within his memory, Cui Buqu found a door slightly ajar.

What would await him if he opened that door?

Cui Buqu tossed away the torch he was holding. He gripped his bamboo walking stick and placed his other hand on the stalagmite, then slowly groped his way forward. After a few steps he backed up again, circling around to a nearby stalagmite and starting the process anew.

Anyone watching would have thought him wandering around aimlessly. But as he fumbled about in the dark, he slowly began to make his way out of the array. When he next opened his eyes, a glimmer of light greeted him: a flickering candle flame that melted away the chill of the cave.

Cui Buqu looked behind him and saw nothing but darkness. Feng Xiao and the two guards were still trapped within the array.

Should he continue forward? Or should he wade back in and find them?

Cui Buqu turned around, ready to head back into the array.

“Since you’re out now, why go back in? The Cui Buqu I know isn’t so soft-hearted.”

The voice came from behind him. Other than their party of four, there shouldn’t have been anyone else in the cave. Yet that voice was acutely familiar…

Cui Buqu whipped around. The figure of a man stood near the candles beside the entrance. His silhouette was blurred, his face impossible to make out—but Cui Buqu could never fail to recognize that voice.

After all, they’d spoken not long ago.

“Yuan Sansi,” Cui Buqu whispered. “To think it was you.”

# Chapter 112

YUAN SANSI ambled over to him. “Surprised?”

Cui Buqu was honest: “I was, at first. But now that I think about it, it makes sense.”

Yuan Sansi looked somewhat surprised himself. “Why do you say so?”

“Your appearance was too convenient. Just as I returned to Boling, you happened to be transferred there as the new commandery governor. Upon returning to the Cui family, I’d have to address those old affairs. You being the commandery governor in addition to Lady Yu’s shixiong would make me lower my guard, and I’d be content to trust in the results of my own investigations. Your background wasn’t difficult to trace; you knew the Zuoyue Bureau would eventually find you and ask about the location of the treasure. But if you came to me yourself, you could control the situation, and I’d have less cause to be suspicious.”

“I had heard Chief Cui has a heart of steel, but it still softened when you met an old friend of your late mother.”

“No need to be so modest,” said Cui Buqu coolly. “I wasn’t soft-hearted; you were clever.”

Seeing Cui Buqu was actually cupping his hands at him, Yuan Sansi couldn’t help but laugh. “Chief Cui is truly amazing!”

Right now, Cui Buqu was meat on the chopping block. He knew no martial arts, and this was Yuan Sansi’s territory. He was utterly powerless. But Yuan Sansi seemed to hold some fondness for him still—his tone was pleasant, and he’d yet to attack.

But behind Cui Buqu lay that dark and oppressive array. Feng Xiao and the two guards had yet to emerge.

“So it was a fake identity?” asked Cui Buqu.

Yuan Sansi shook his head. “It was real. I really am your mother’s shixiong, and the Yu family was very kind to me. Your grandfather accepted

me into the Yu residence and took great pains to teach me. When I left them, I felt conflicted and troubled by the burden of my past. I wanted to chart my own path; I didn't want to follow the one your grandfather set out for me: to study, to marry, and to spend the rest of my life just this way. I felt guilt toward Lady Yu, but I had to leave."

He sighed, lost in memory. "I traveled the world. I saw many novel sights and had many novel experiences. It sent me down a completely different path. Had I stayed with the Yu family, I'd have no doubt lived a life of utter mediocrity. I'd never have tasted true success."

"And the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai gave you the chance to exercise your potential?"

Yuan Sansi smiled. "You're wrong, Xianzhi.[11] The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai didn't exist back then, and they're not so wicked as you imagine. Anything you want, they can give you."

"I want you dead. Can they give me this?"

Yuan Sansi shrugged. "You're a rare genius. You're not like the unwashed masses, who waste their time on pointless debates. I know you have many questions. Once you receive the answers, perhaps you'll change your mind. It's not impossible."

"Then I shall wait for your silver tongue to work its magic."

Yuan Sansi chuckled at his sarcastic tone. Standing in the light of the candles, he regarded Cui Buqu still shrouded in darkness as one might an ignorant child.

An unarmed child, at that. Even if he had a tongue sharper than the world's swiftest sword, it was a tongue and no more. To Yuan Sansi, Cui Buqu was an infant before a butcher's knife. No matter how many schemes he had up his sleeve, none of them could help him now.

Besides, Yuan Sansi considered himself a prudent man. If he'd been all sparkle and no substance, the Yu family wouldn't have been so fond of him. Lady Yu—a woman as sharp as winter frost—wouldn't have agreed to marry him. But even Lady Yu had failed to grasp the extent of Yuan Sansi's ambition. His sights had always been set higher than the shabby plot of land known as Boling.

“In truth,” Yuan Sansi said, “The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai are capable of far more than you could ever dream. But that aside, I have to ask: Did you realize we already met in the capital?”

Cui Buqu’s expression shifted. Backlit by the candles’ hazy glow, Yuan Sansi raised a hand and mimicked flourishing a sword.

With his perfect memory, the motion alone was enough for Cui Buqu to recall. “The thousand-lantern banquet during the Dragon Boat Festival. Princess Leping’s Qingli Garden. Buried lamp oil. A failed assassination and rebellion.” As he spoke each word, his voice was deliberate.

Yuan Sansi smiled. “Correct. The person in white who lurked beneath the carriage and fought Feng Xiao—that was me. You didn’t realize? I went easy on you that night. Considering my skill, how else could I have failed to kill you?”

When Yuan Sansi had left the Yu family, he truly must have had some unparalleled experiences. The duel that night had proved him to be stronger than Fo’er. He was Feng Xiao’s equal, if not his superior.

Many things now made sense.

Yuan Sansi was a martial artist, but he’d pretended to be a lawful citizen and trodden the slow road to becoming a court official. The Yuan clan was an influential surname in the north, and after the collapse of the Wei dynasty, many Yuans had gone on to become officials in succeeding dynasties. Yuan Sansi was but one of them. Dynasties had changed again and again throughout the centuries. Emperors would never reject a talented official just because their clan had once sat upon the imperial throne.

According to regulation, when an official was transferred, the emperor would summon them to the capital for debriefing. Before heading to Boling Commandery, Yuan Sansi had gone through that exact process, and he’d made use of the opportunity. Ostensibly he’d returned to the capital as part of his duties, but he’d secretly been in contact with the rebels. He was known as a rising official; it wasn’t hard for him to obtain an invitation to Qingli Garden. No one noticed when a guest slipped away in the middle of the banquet to hide beneath a carriage.

Yuan Sansi was both a brilliantly ambitious man and a peerless martial artist—he maintained two identities and stood at the pinnacle of the

jianghu. No wonder he'd thought the plain and ordinary Yu family beneath him.

If he'd gone easy on Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao that night it was only so he could show off. And today, he hadn't exposed himself to Cui Buqu merely to tell him his life was in Yuan Sansi's hands. He meant to impress upon him the sheer power of the Thirteen Floors. A group of rebels the Zuoyue Bureau should have eliminated had freely entered Qingli Garden and made an attempted attack on the guests. Of course they were capable of even more.

"It's been a long time since the collapse of the Wei dynasty," said Cui Buqu slowly. "And the current emperor isn't the one who vanquished Wei. Why take revenge on him?"

Yuan Sansi shook his head. "I'm not out for revenge. Xianzhi, you think too little of me. To the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, the entire world is a chessboard, and all living beings but pieces upon it. If you join us, you'll learn much more."

The corners of Cui Buqu's mouth curled. "Are they not simply plotting to usurp the throne? Why make it sound so noble? I'm afraid you have no skill in persuasion. Surely your leader is more convincing than you are. Where is he? If he comes, perhaps I'll consider it."

Yuan Sansi smiled. "Why would we require Yi-xiansheng's presence? We have another distinguished guest you haven't seen in some time. He's missed you dearly, so I invited him here so the two of you can reminisce."

He gestured toward the candlelight spilling out from a nearby doorway—an invitation for Cui Buqu to enter.

"My three friends are still in the array," said Cui Buqu. "If your aim is to win me over, shouldn't you release them?"

"Worry not," said Yuan Sansi. "They're all safe and sound. You'll be able to see them later."

It seemed that even Feng Xiao had been captured. Cui Buqu frowned slightly. For the first time in his life, he felt things were spiraling out of control. He suspected he wouldn't be pleased to meet whoever waited in that room.

He straightened and tossed away the bamboo walking stick; he had enough light to see by and no longer needed it. He walked steadily forward, step by step. Once past Yuan Sansi, he could see into the chamber. The room was bright and clean. The night pearls inlaid in the walls glowed faintly—it hadn't been candlelight after all.

A man sat with his back to him, cross-legged on a cattail mat.

He was indeed familiar. So familiar Cui Buqu could no longer maintain his cold, hardened expression; his shock was starkly visible in his eyes.

Yuan Sansi smiled faintly.

The man turned around. His hair was the color of snow, his robes such a clean white they seemed to shine. His face still showed vestiges of the handsomeness of his youth, and his smile was warm and familiar. He waved at Cui Buqu. "Good gracious, how did you torment yourself into this state? Your complexion's even worse than I remember."

His tone was chiding, that of an elder scolding his disciple after the latter's long absence. But Cui Buqu's blood had turned to ice. He stood for a long time, unmoving and silent. The man didn't prompt him but patiently waited for his response.

At last, Cui Buqu walked in and sat on the cattail mat. He got right to the point. "I didn't expect it to be you, Xiansheng."

Fan Yun gave him a kindly smile. "If you'd been able to guess, I wouldn't deserve to be called your xiansheng."

"I remember you told me you hate being bound. That you wish to drift free like the clouds or the wild geese. That even though Liuli Palace recruited you, you only accepted the position of consultant so you could come and go as you pleased."

"Correct," said Fan Yun. "That is indeed what I said."

"You said you're a descendant of the famous prime minister Fan Ju, and your lifelong wish is to abide by the teachings of the Fan clan: to find an enlightened ruler to lead this world, bringing peace and prosperity to all."

“I said that too.” Fan Yun smiled. “And that’s just what I’ve been doing.”

Cui Buqu laughed, a cold, sneering sound. “I can’t see how the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, a shameless parasite that skulks in the dark, can be more worthy of leading than Yang Jian!”

Fan Yun shook his head. “It’s been a long time since our last meeting, but your personality is as sharp as ever. But that can be a double-edged sword. If the blade’s too sharp, sometimes when you cut others, you cut yourself too.”

Now that his initial shock had passed, Cui Buqu’s face had returned to its usual smooth tranquility. Even Fan Yun couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“No wonder,” Cui Buqu said. “From the moment I entered this place, I felt it was familiar. The Ursa Major Twin Jade Array was a formation you personally taught me. You told me once that very few could deploy this array, and those capable of escaping it are fewer still. Was the story about the treasure all part of your scheme?”

“No, the treasure is real. Emperor Wei built this place to give his descendants a way to defend themselves if need arose. But we emptied it long ago.”

Cui Buqu glanced back at Yuan Sansi with a smile quite unlike a smile. “So he donated the wealth of his entire clan and became a lackey who lurks undercover among his enemies. He spent so long as an official too. Yuan-shibo[12] is truly a man of great achievements.”

Yuan Sansi was thick-skinned; he merely replied courteously, “You flatter me, Xianzhi.”

Seeing them like this, any observer might have thought the three were sitting harmoniously together, happily discussing poetry and essays rather than the fate of empires.

# Chapter 113

FAN YUN STILL VIVIDLY remembered that gloomy day.

A misty rain had been falling from the sky as he'd sat alone by the roadside, conducting divinations beneath a thatched roof, when a young man in coarse clothes had approached him. He had closed his broken umbrella and sat down opposite Fan Yun. But Fan Yun was immersed in the small array he'd laid out with wooden sticks; he ignored the newcomer.

The stranger watched for a while before speaking. "You should add a defensive line at the position of xun."[13]

Fan Yun was holding a wooden stick in his hand, about to place it at xun. Surprised that the young man's thoughts so neatly matched his own, he finally raised his head to get a look at him. "You've studied divination?"

The young man shook his head. "I've merely read *The Six Yin of the Sublime Grotto* by Huang Shigong, but there were many parts I failed to understand."

He'd read the book with incomplete understanding, yet he'd already achieved this level of skill. Geniuses really did exist. Fan Yun had a fondness for talented people. He examined the young man's sickly complexion and his listless air, then shook his head. "You're fated to achieve great things, yet you find yourself beset by constant misfortune. Crises atop crises, danger atop danger. This is especially hard on your family and friends. The closer someone is to you, the more they will suffer."

The young man was unruffled. "It's as you say. But I don't believe in fate."

"You're young and energetic now," said Fan Yun. "You believe the will of man can overcome the will of the heavens. What you don't yet know is that one's fate is a difficult thing to change."

"I've never thought of changing my fate," the young man said mildly. "I simply don't believe in it. What the heavens wish to do to me is their business; what path I choose to walk is mine. There's no connection between the two."

Fan Yun had never met anyone like this young man before. Everyone he'd ever known either strongly believed in fate and organized their life around it—looking for good luck while running from the bad, taking care in everything they did—or had been resolute in rejecting its influence. But this man did neither. He simply refused to cooperate.

What fate would befall a person like that?

Suddenly Fan Yun was interested. "What's your name? What do you do for a living?"

"Cui Buqu. I did business—trading—with my foster father. He passed away last month."

"Why not come with me? The arts, astronomy, geography, writing, and divination. I can teach you all these subjects and many more."

"I won't become anyone's disciple."

"That's fine."

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A look of nostalgia came over Fan Yun as he recalled the past. "Though not in name, we're master and disciple in all ways that matter. You're one of the most talented men I've ever met. If your health hadn't prevented you from learning martial arts, you'd probably be a practitioner on par with Yuan Sansi."

Yuan Sansi laughed at being used as a benchmark. "No one is perfect, as the saying goes. Xianzhi became the Zuoyue Bureau's chief at an extremely young age, and Dugu Qieluo views him as her confidant. He's already a titan. If he were as skilled with the sword as he is with the pen, even the heavens would grow jealous!"

The more amiable they pretended to be, the more warning bells rang in Cui Buqu's heart. Fan Yun could have come to Cui Buqu at any time and spoken these words if he wanted to recruit him. But that would have been too mundane a method, and far less effective than what they were doing now: setting a trap and waiting for Cui Buqu to fall into it, wearing down his morale, then offering him rewards and appealing to sentiment.

The appearance of Fan Yun and Yuan Sansi was surely only the beginning. The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai must have more tricks up their sleeve. Something was lurking at the back of Cui Buqu's mind, eager to come to the forefront. He squashed it. "Since you wish you to recruit me, shouldn't you do the same for my three companions?" he asked flatly.

Yuan Sansi's lips curved in a knowing smile. He looked at Cui Buqu for a long moment before answering. "There's no rush."

Cui Buqu frowned. It was a fleeting motion, gone in an instant, but Yuan Sansi drew the obvious conclusion: The chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, a man of relentless logic and reason, was finally experiencing a rare moment of uncertainty.

From the minute he'd set foot in Boling, it had been inevitable. Yuan Sansi smiled softly. He looked forward to seeing Cui Buqu's expression when he realized the truth.

Fan Yun was still speaking. "Buqu, you were blessed with an immense talent for administration, practically the reincarnation of Zhang Liang himself.[14] Would it not be a pity to limit yourself to leading the Zuoyue Bureau? Perhaps Yang Jian values your talent, but he doesn't see you as a pillar of his nation the way he does his prime minister and generals. If he did, you'd be part of the Department of State Affairs by now. You were born frail and have suffered your entire life. If you continue to exhaust yourself with all this plotting and running about, you'll die before your time."

Cui Buqu lowered his lashes, concealing his eyes from Fan Yun. Even ants strove to stay alive. No one was willing to die, especially not someone like Cui Buqu, who held such immense authority.

If one lost their life, what good was authority?

"What are the goals of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai? If there's someone you wish to make emperor, at least let me meet him so I can judge how capable he is for myself," said Cui Buqu.

"You'll find out once you join us," said Fan Yun. "Didn't you come up against Duan Qihu in Qiemo? He dominated the northwest for decades and was a man of great ability, yet even he only ranked twelfth."

“And what about you, Xiansheng? What rank do you and Yuan Sansi hold?”

Fan Yun didn’t keep him in suspense. “Yuan Sansi is fourth, Si-xiansheng. I am third, San-xiansheng. Go Un, the leader of the Buyeo Sect who died at the hands of the Jiejian Bureau’s Deputy Chief Feng, was fifth, Wu-xiansheng.”

“Two mighty talents, yet you rank only third and fourth. If I join the Thirteen Floors, I fear they’ll give me Duan Qihu’s empty seat and no more.”

Fan Yun smiled. “Yuan Sansi and I personally came to recruit you. That shows how much our pavilion leader esteems you. If you join us, he’ll give you a rank higher than us old men, not lower. The Thirteen Floors overflow with talents, and the scale on which they operate is far beyond what you imagine. You’ve experienced it yourself. You went to such pains to eradicate Duan Qihu, and the Sui dynasty declared it a great achievement. But for the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, Duan Qihu was no more than a disposable chess piece.”

Cui Buqu smiled. “Not only did I eradicate Duan Qihu, I also rooted out the Prince of Jin’s confidant, Yuxiu, not to mention his double, Yuheng. There’s also the leader of the Buyeo Sect, Go Un. You lost a great many men to me during the rebellion at Qingli Garden, and yet you’re accepting me with open arms. I fear I’ll suffer your vengeance if I join.”

“There’s no need to worry about that,” said Fan Yun. “I called Duan Qihu disposable, but that Go Un was something else. Leading the Buyeo Sect made him arrogant; he often disobeyed orders. He was also a Goguryeon: a foreigner. That man couldn’t be trusted. You did us a favor by removing him. We needed someone more trustworthy to take over the Buyeo Sect, and now they will.”

Studying Fan Yun’s brightly smiling face, Cui Buqu’s heart sank.

“Buqu,” Fan Yun patiently continued, “you’re a clever person. Upstanding men should speak frankly: I’ve strongly recommended you to the pavilion leader, and he admires you greatly as well. Compared to that two-faced hypocrite Yang Jian, I believe the pavilion leader would make a better emperor. He’s a broad-minded man with extraordinary abilities. He won’t hold a grudge over what you’ve done until now. In fact, he admires

the clear-minded ruthlessness with which you face down your enemies. You merely served your master loyally, and there's nothing wrong with that. If you're willing to join us, what's past will be forgiven, written off in a single stroke."

"So I didn't guess wrong," said Cui Buqu.

Fan Yun was taken aback. "What?"

"You do resent Yang Jian."

Fan Yun hesitated, then sneered. "Yang Jian has thousands of enemies. Whether I number among them makes little difference. But you are my disciple. I won't harm you."

"Considering that I'm here now, I fear it no longer matters whether or not I'm willing."

"Do you remember the first time we met, and I divined your fate by reading your face? Yang Jian's fate is that of a king. He was born into luxury, yet his features tell me he won't meet his end from old age or illness, but some other misfortune. The imperial court is at its peak now, but it too has an inauspicious future. As prosperous as the Sui are today, they share the fate of Yang Jian—they won't continue beyond the second generation. Yang Jian is destined to end his life in desolation, and his descendants will fare no better. You learned almost every discipline while at my side. The only one you refused to study was divination. Still, you were exposed to it every day; you can't have failed to pick some things up. You must know I speak the truth."

"In that case, Xiansheng's new master must be a dragon and phoenix among men, blessed from birth with the fate of becoming emperor?"

Fan Yun nodded. "He is. The pavilion leader is not just a master of pen and sword—it is his fate to be a dragon soaring through the heavens in immeasurable glory."

Cui Buqu was growing tired of this talk. After a moment's silence, he heaved a sigh. "Since we've come this far, Xiansheng, I'll be blunt. If I wanted to join the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, what kind of application would I need to submit? If you want me to assassinate Yang Jian, I fear it's impossible."

Fan Yun had been waiting for just this question. He smiled. “Yang Jian will of course be dealt with; your help is not needed there. However, Yang Jian’s wife, Lady Dugu, is unyielding, no less so than a man. Even if we eliminate Yang Jian, she’ll be a threat to us as long as she remains alive. Dugu trusts you implicitly—you have more opportunities to get close to her than anyone else. This is where you will lend us a hand, becoming the bridge by which we reach her. Once this matter is concluded, I will apply to the pavilion leader and nominate you for the position of deputy leader. You will rank above everyone else and answer only to him. When he ascends the throne, you’ll be a king in all but name. Won’t you then be able to enjoy a far more carefree life? Those who treated you callously, like the Cui family, will beat their chests and weep in remorse.”

“These are empty promises,” Cui Buqu said calmly. “You know they aren’t enough to tempt me.”

Fan Yun smiled. “Then what about a rare treasure that can repair your body, the Jade of Heaven Lake?”

Cui Buqu frowned.

Fan Yun glanced toward Yuan Sansi, who stood and went over to the stone wall, his hand groping among the night pearls inlaid in its surface. The ground rumbled, and the tile beneath his foot sank. He bent to the ground and produced a small box from a hidden recess. Yuan Sansi pulled back the lid. In the center, nestled on a bed of thick brocade, was an object. A stone as clear as crystal, shimmering in the dim light.

“You’ve seen the Jade of Heaven Lake with your own eyes,” said Fan Yun. “You must know the object before you is authentic. Though this stone cannot completely cure your illness, it can prolong your life by several decades. This is the greatest gesture of sincerity I can offer.”

Feng Xiao had long since turned over the Jade of Heaven Lake to the imperial court. How could it be here? If some mishap had occurred during transport, or if someone had stolen it from the palace after it arrived, Cui Buqu would have heard about it.

Yet this jade was the genuine article. He clearly remembered its texture, size, and shape; it was impossible for a second, identical stone to exist. Even the interior of the stone was the same, with that pool of icy blue-green at its center.

There could be only one explanation: a traitor. Someone who had been working against him ever since they'd arrived in Boling, or perhaps even earlier.

"Feng Xiao," whispered Cui Buqu.

# Chapter 114

CUI BUQU GAZED at the Jade of Heaven Lake, and Fan Yun looked at him.

“Buqu, you’re very talented. To die at such a young age, after only living a few short years—will this not be a pity? Your ambitions, your aspirations, stretch far beyond your current position. Everyone believes leading the Zuoyue Bureau at your age is already a difficult and lofty achievement, but to you, it’s hardly worth mentioning. You and I are the same. We use people as chess pieces. Attitudes, trends, situations, events—these are things for us to play with. Perhaps you care nothing for fame and reputation, but without your life, what can you achieve?”

Fan Yun coaxed him along, pleasant yet tireless. It was the same tone with which he’d taught Cui Buqu in the past. This student had always been quick on the uptake, only needing to see one case to understand three. He believed this time would be no different. Cui Buqu was sure to make the wisest choice.

But Cui Buqu remained silent. Fan Yun waited patiently. To turn traitor and plot a rebellion against one’s sovereign was not a decision to be made lightly. Most would be terrified out of their wits at merely hearing such an idea. Cui Buqu was an extraordinary man, but even so, Fan Yun and Yuan Sansi would have found it suspicious if he agreed too readily.

At length, Cui Buqu said, “I want to see Feng Xiao.”

Fan Yun showed no surprise at his request. He smiled. “Surely you’ve already guessed how the jade came to be here. Are you so certain of Feng Xiao? Or are you unable to accept your own deductions?”

Cui Buqu’s face was indifferent. “Words are easily spoken. I’ll trust the evidence of my eyes.”

Fan Yun sighed. “Do you not understand? He has joined the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. Will you refuse to give up until the truth is staring you in the face? I’ve never seen you this concerned over someone else’s loyalties.

Whether he betrayed Yang Jian and joined the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai—is this so important to you?"

"It's very important."

Fan Yun nodded. "Very well." He turned to Yuan Sansi. "I must trouble Yuan-xiong. Please summon the deputy leader."

Yuan Sansi turned and left.

"Deputy leader?" asked Cui Buqu.

"I know the Zuoyue Bureau has done their due diligence investigating the Thirteen Floors, but I don't imagine you know that our pavilion leader—Yi-xiansheng—appoints two deputy leaders. These deputies have great authority. They need only give the word, and they can mobilize all connections and resources belonging to floors two through twelve regardless of location. No one would dare disobey."

*All connections and resources, regardless of location*. Cui Buqu turned these words over in his mind, and his expression grew thoughtful. "Then I was right. Lin Yong of Yandang Mountain Estate. Ning Shewo, leader of the Jinhuan Guild. Both are members of the Thirteen Floors."

Fan Yun smiled but said nothing: a tacit confirmation.

"You hatched your plan long before Duan Qihu's death. The letter on his corpse wasn't a clue regarding a secret meeting of members of the Thirteen Floors. It was bait you deliberately left. Upon reading the letter, I'd almost certainly attempt to decrypt it, and even if I didn't go myself, I'd send Qiao Xian and others to investigate its contents. The Zuoyue Bureau needed to leave someone to oversee matters in the capital, while also dispatching someone for the investigation—me. Without any other support, after running into Yuan Sansi, I'd be sure to ask Feng Xiao for his cooperation. Feng Xiao was already one of yours, and so your trap was sprung. Even if I were to sprout wings, I couldn't escape the Thirteen Floors' machinations. Incredible, Xiansheng. As expected of an old hand; I'm not your match."

Fan Yun's smile was reserved. "I know you're mistrustful by nature. The letter, Yuan Sansi, Feng Xiao. Had any one of them turned up alone, you would have been suspicious. But confronted with all three at once, you became distracted, your judgment muddled. On top of that, while in Boling,

you had to deal with the Cui family's mess. Buqu, even if you have wisdom on par with the gods, you're merely a man. It's impossible for every calculation you make to be flawless."

The sound of footsteps came from outside. They were sure and steady, the footfalls of a powerful martial artist who had no intention of moving silently. Cui Buqu could hear every step clearly.

Two beautiful maids entered carrying a wooden tray. On the tray, fragrant wine rippled within a white jade saucer. The maid who stepped forward was clad in white robes of fine gauze, her complexion fair and her hair dark. Her steps were light and graceful. When she bent to set the saucer before them, the curve of her chest swelled beneath the loose drape of her clothing, and the faint scent of her perfume seemed to seep into one's heart.

Cui Buqu was no monk oblivious to the vanities of the mundane world. From the moment he'd entered the room—though it was a mere corner within a damp cave—he had seen that every inch of it was lavishly furnished. Leaving aside the night pearls embedded in the stone walls, even the cattail cushion on which he sat was embroidered with gold and silver thread, covered in silk and stuffed with soft cotton and cattail reeds. It was obviously an item of luxury. Nor had he failed to notice that, concealed within this chamber, there were quite a few entrances and exits all leading to different areas. The room was both hidden and accessible—an ideal gathering place.

Whatever else the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai might want for, they certainly had no lack of wealth.

The maid cast him a flirtatious glance, but found Cui Buqu stonily indifferent, his eyes downcast. She set down the saucer of wine and silently withdrew. Fan Yun watched the exchange with a silent smile. He took a single sip from the saucer.

Since antiquity, those meant for greatness had been men possessed of extraordinary restraint. Even if those lovely women were to strip naked and dance before them, Fan Yun would not be moved. If Cui Buqu had been so easily swayed by their seductions, he'd have held this disciple of his in contempt.

Shortly after the maids departed, two men entered. The first approached on slow steps and stopped in front of Cui Buqu. His boots were

black, in a common style, but their quality was unmatched. Feng Xiao was so fussy; even his boots were required to be outstanding. Cui Buqu recognized them at a glance.

He raised his head and met Feng Xiao's eyes.

The two gazed at each other, the silence stretching between them. Yuan Sansi smiled. "You've only been apart a short while. Why do you look at each other like it's been a lifetime since you last met?"

Cui Buqu looked up at Feng Xiao. "I would like to hear it from Deputy Chief Feng's mouth. Is it true?"

Feng Xiao's expression was one of apathy—there was no smile, no mockery, no malicious glee. His gaze on Cui Buqu was flat with disinterest. The frivolousness with which he'd teased him was gone, as was the enthusiasm with which he'd admired his own reflection. In their place was a serene indifference, as if Cui Buqu was merely a stranger passing by, unworthy of a second glance. When he finally spoke, he said one word: "Yes."

"Before arriving in Boling, you were already with them?"

"Yes."

"The night of the revolt in Qingli Garden, when you insisted on climbing into my carriage. You coincidentally clashed with Yuan Sansi, saving my life. Even then?"

"Yes."

"I was your trial," said Cui Buqu. "What did they offer you? Something the deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau would be willing to join the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai for. Surely it must be extraordinary."

Feng Xiao's expression finally flickered ever so slightly. Cui Buqu noticed a fleeting look of pity—pity for a loser who had been deceived.

An itch came into Cui Buqu's throat; he couldn't suppress a cough. Feng Xiao kept his voice very low, but it still echoed through the chamber. "There are presently three demonic sects. Hehuan Sect, Huanyue Sect, and Fajing Sect, the last of which I lead. Many years ago, they were a single, unified sect. Their leader was Cui Youwang, the strongest martial artist not just among the demonic sects, but in all in the world," Feng Xiao said.

Cui Buqu's expression remained placid; he nodded slightly. "I've heard of this, yes."

He'd been betrayed, surrounded by enemies on all sides. But still he retained his composure, at least on the surface. Fan Yun looked at his pupil and sighed to himself. If he had any choice, he wouldn't have used this method to coerce Cui Buqu's cooperation. Alas, Cui Buqu was a brilliant man, and not the type to readily admit defeat. Only something unexpected and overwhelming, something so shocking it left him too stunned to react, would do. Without such an opportunity to convince him, it'd be nigh impossible to persuade Cui Buqu to join the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai.

Of course, it would be far easier to kill him. But a mind like his was rare. The addition of Cui Buqu to their organization would be akin to gifting wings to a tiger. Fan Yun wished to offer up Cui Buqu's talent to the master he served, not merely kill him to eliminate an obstacle.

"Before Cui Youwang's death," Feng Xiao continued, "he left behind a technique capable of transferring one's blood and soul, as well as recasting their meridians, called Refining Jade. However, this technique vanished with his death, and no records of it remain. In the past, my master had three disciples. Besides Guang Lingsan and myself, we also had a shimei. A few years ago, she was gravely injured. Even the best physicians and medicines had no effect; only the Refining Jade technique could save her. It was to seek this technique that I joined the Jiejian Bureau."

Here, Yuan Sansi took up the story. "By coincidence, the pavilion leader has collected many ancient martial texts from around the world. The lost Refining Jade technique was among them. This technique was recorded in two separate volumes. After obtaining the first, Deputy Chief Feng tried it on his shimei. Her condition immediately improved."

By this point, Cui Buqu had guessed the rest. He nodded. "So in order to obtain the second volume, you betrayed me. That was your trial for joining the Thirteen Floors. If I weren't the pitiable fool duped by your schemes, your deep and earnest feelings would surely have moved me, Deputy Chief Feng."

"Look at your current predicament—without my help, you have no way out. They doubted my sincerity, so they used you as the trial. If I could sell out even you, they could rest at ease."

“I didn’t expect I was so important to Deputy Chief Feng.” Cui Buqu’s mouth twisted with mockery.

Feng Xiao crouched down so their eyes were level. “You’re wrong. You’re not important. The position of Zuoyue Bureau chief that you hold—that’s what’s important. Honestly, even I was surprised it went so smoothly. I thought for sure you’d bring more people, at least Qiao Xian or Zhangsun. If you had, perhaps I’d have had a much harder time. Yet you only brought two Zuoyue guards—no better than errand runners—and left the capital with me, completely unconcerned. Could it be that you already trusted me to the point that you were willing to put your life in my hands?”

Cui Buqu didn’t speak. He only coughed, his hands supporting his weight on the cushion becoming colder and whiter. His back was as straight as a pine, but there was a brittleness to it, as if it might snap at the first gust of wind. He was used to coughing, but now he couldn’t stop; his lungs burned like fire, filling his chest with waves of scorching pain. The colder his body grew, the hotter they burned. From his heart to his meridians, it spread like a wildfire licking up withered grass, turning an expanse of soft green into fluttering gray ash. The flames engulfed everything—the creatures and the land, all hearts and their passion.

He didn’t need to reply. Feng Xiao understood. He laughed and grabbed Cui Buqu’s chin, forcing him to meet his gaze. “Fan-xiansheng said you’re cold on the outside yet hot on the inside. An icy exterior that conceals a heart full of passion. I didn’t believe him before. Now I do.” He sneered. “How unfortunate that you placed your precious trust in the wrong person, Lord Chief.”

# Chapter 115

FAN YUN STOOD and watched. He made no move to stop them.

He'd known Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao were each unwilling to submit to the other. If they could be lured in with promised rewards, both would be of great use to the pavilion leader. But it wouldn't do for them to be too friendly. As long as they were at odds, their leader could use one to check the other, and managing them would be much simpler. Thus he was pleased to no end to see Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu turn on each other.

He watched the situation simmer, waiting until the moment before it boiled over to speak. "All right," he said, "From now on, we're a family. Buqu has been my disciple for a long time, even if he is rather willful…"

"Who's his family?" Feng Xiao said, lip curling. He released Cui Buqu's chin and casually wiped his hand on Cui Buqu's clothes, as if merely touching his skin had been a great humiliation to him. "Fan-xiansheng. When you came to recruit me, you did not say you'd be recruiting Cui Buqu as well. Our pavilion leader and Yuan Sansi are both top-tier martial artists with skills not inferior to my own. And you joined long before I did, so you have more experience; I can accept that. But this man…"

The glance he threw at Cui Buqu was full of contempt and ridicule. "How exactly is this man qualified to be deputy leader instantly upon joining? To have a rank equal to myself?"

Fan Yun smiled. "You jest. Buqu is the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau. You are from the Jiejian Bureau—was he not always your equal?"

"That was only because he had Empress Dugu to give him a leg up," said Feng Xiao coolly. "Her favor won him his current position. And to be honest, I have yet to see this leader of yours. If I spoke some nonsense claiming to be loyal to the Thirteen Floors for its own sake, I'm sure you wouldn't believe me, Fan-xiansheng."

"You speak sincerely. I believe you," Fan Yun replied smoothly.

“I joined the Thirteen Floors for three reasons. First, to obtain the Refining Jade technique. Second, your promise that I could attain rank and authority far beyond what I could achieve in Sui. Third, so I wouldn’t need to spend every day bickering with this Cui bastard. But now you’re telling me not only must I see him regularly, we must serve as officials together after we bring about the new dynasty? I’ve sold him out; I can’t take it back. But he’s sure to hold a grudge against me. If you insist on welcoming him like this, is it any different from putting a blade to my back?”

Fan Yun remained unbothered. “Then what does Feng-gongzi propose?”

“Either me or him. There can only be one.” Feng Xiao narrowed his eyes and raised his chin. He oozed arrogance; the lines of his body were sharp as a blade, his eyes ablaze. Now *this* was the Feng Xiao Cui Buqu knew, and it was the image Deputy Chief Feng left in most people’s minds. Wayward and unbridled, playful and teasing—it was like this Feng Xiao whiled away his time. Yet hidden beneath that veneer was someone proud and unrestrained, a man blessed by the heavens from birth.

Though Fan Yun was happy to see conflict between the two, it would bring him no benefit if their enmity impaired the Thirteen Floors’ plans. He couldn’t ignore Feng Xiao’s declaration. He considered a moment and said, “All right, I will speak to our leader. After Buqu finishes his task, he will fake this death and head south. He can start over there.”

Feng Xiao’s handsome face was cold and impassive, but he voiced no objections. Only belatedly did Fan Yun remember to ask, “What do you think, Buqu?”

Cui Buqu started to chuckle. As he laughed, he began to cough, and the harder he coughed the more he laughed, until he was gasping for breath. “It seems you’ve already decided everything for me. Does it matter whether I agree or not?”

Fan Yun’s expression was mild as he watched Cui Buqu laugh like a madman, as if his pupil was no more than a willful child throwing a tantrum. “Considering your situation, I was certain you wouldn’t refuse.”

Cui Buqu laughed for nearly a quarter of an hour before he slowly lapsed into silence. “Xiansheng, you’re getting old,” he said at last.

Fan Yun raised a brow. “Oh?”

“Since the eleventh year of the Jin dynasty’s Taiyuan era, the northern dynasties have seen the three Weis, Northern Qi, and Northern Zhou—five dynasties across more than two centuries. They met with every kind of turmoil: the foreigners of the north storming south, the flames of war, the rise of powerful clans, the collapse of dynasties, the struggle for power between Buddhists and Daoists. This continued until the reign of Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou, who quelled the chaos and rebuilt everything anew. Despite the mediocre emperors who succeeded him, the long-separated nations of the Central Plains are fated to become one once more. This will always be the case. Yang Jian may not be a match for the legendary Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, but he is an enlightened ruler, the first such after Emperor Wu, Yuwen Yong.”

Fan Yun smiled. “To think you have such a high opinion of Yang Jian.”

Cui Buqu coughed several times and continued, “No emperor before him—including those of the Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen dynasties in the south—has turned his authority on the aristocrats. Yang Jian alone dared to overturn the status quo: He issued an edict promoting officials based on the criteria of meticulousness, prudence, efficiency, and honesty. Even the poor have a path through which they may elevate themselves. Perhaps it is a narrow path now, but in years to come, it will broaden. Eventually, the notion of determining rank by dint of one’s birth will be replaced entirely, and a new principle upon which the world turns will be born. Taking only this as an example, I must ask: Who else would risk drawing the ire of the world’s most powerful clans to execute such a mighty, radical idea? I fear that Xiansheng’s chosen master lacks the resolve.”

“Elevating talent wherever it is found is of course a good thing,” Fan Yun countered, “but Yang Jian is too reckless in his methods. He’ll eventually be too buried in criticism to make any headway. Even the emperor can’t ignore all the dissenting opinions around him. I’ve already said being an emperor was always his destiny—but unfortunately, he’s an emperor doomed to fall. Dazzling as he may be now, his reign will be short-lived. A ruler must understand when to push and when to relent; they must understand that it’s the narrow river that flows the farthest. Only then will they achieve a lasting legacy.”

“Let me guess. Xiansheng’s chosen master is certainly not the emperor of Southern Chen. If one wishes to conquer the land, they have two choices. The first is to follow in the footsteps of Yang Jian and wrest power from those who hold it via blood ties. But this took Yang Jian decades, far too long for your lord. He can’t wait, so he’s left with the second option. He must take an immense risk and walk the less-trodden road: craft and execute an enormous conspiracy. But have you truly thought this through? The lands have been divided for a long time; what the people want is crystal clear. Even if your lord succeeds in seizing the throne, if he doesn’t govern with a hand at least as firm as Yang Jian’s, his attempts will be in vain.”

Cui Buqu watched Fan Yun’s face, which was growing darker and darker. He held nothing back as he spoke, quiet and steady, every word keen as a knife. “Perhaps I wasn’t clear. Did you really believe you had the power to convince me? You’ve woefully overestimated yourselves. Your Thirteen Floors are no more than flies and dogs that should huddle in the dark sewers where you belong rather than showing your faces and making fools of yourselves.”

Upon hearing these words, Yuan Sansi frowned. His hand twitched, but he only looked at Fan Yun.

Feng Xiao’s lashes were lowered; he wasn’t looking at Cui Buqu or anyone else. It was as if he’d detached himself from this place entirely, his thoughts inscrutable.

Cui Buqu had bluntly sawn open their ambitions and ideals, bit by ragged bit, exposing the bloody guts for all to see. Fan Yun’s smile finally vanished completely. When smiling, his face was kindly and amiable. But now, with his lips drawn into a thin line, there was a palpable chill about him. “Buqu, I didn’t teach you just for you to try to prove you know better than me.”

“That’s why I said you’re getting old, Xiansheng. As people grow old, they grow arrogant. They believe their experience alone will allow them to surmount any challenge. It’s a pity even Xiansheng is not exempt from this failing.” Cui Buqu was in enemy territory, facing off against three experts who could crush him with a finger, yet his tongue remained as poisonous as ever, giving no quarter to his opponents.

“I take it you’re refusing to join?” asked Fan Yun. “Even if the Jade of Heaven Lake can save your life?”

“My apologies.” Cui Buqu pursed his thin lips. “I’ve never deigned to work with fools. If someone like Feng-er can become a deputy leader, this is already a sinking ship. Now, if you’re willing to surrender yourself to the court and turn over your master, I might consider putting in a word for you before the emperor.”

Fan Yun’s attempt had failed utterly; he laughed in anger. “We’ve known each other for years. We are master and disciple, as close as father and son. In light of this, I’ll ask you one last thing: Do you understand the consequences of refusing?”

“Us, as close as father and son?” Cui Buqu asked in surprise. “So is it your family tradition for fathers to set up their sons to be betrayed, or for sons to push their fathers into evil? Such a unique family you have, Xiansheng!”

Fan Yun looked at Cui Buqu as if he were regarding a corpse.

At this moment, one of the stone walls slid open, and a man walked in. The man’s face had a delicate youthfulness that lent an androgynous air to his features. He was beautiful—if one ignored the eyepatch covering one eye. That single flaw gave his face a sinister cast.

His gaze fell first upon Feng Xiao. “Between the two of you, I was sure Cui Buqu would be the one to join, while you would refuse to submit even on pain of death. A shame; I was hoping to avenge this lost eye of mine.”

Feng Xiao shrugged. “We each served our own masters then. Blades care not whom they cut: If I hadn’t fought you with my full strength, I fear I would have lost my life.”

Fan Yun stepped between them. “Er-xiansheng. Feng-gongzi didn’t do it out of malice. Right now, we’re all on the same side. We must let go of our grievances. Let us shake hands and make peace; our leader has already agreed to compensate you properly.”

Yuxiu bared his teeth in a chilling smile. “Of course. I can’t hold a grudge against one of our own. Cui Buqu, this is why you shouldn’t be so quick to make enemies—a day will always come when you will meet again.

But fear not, out of respect for you foiling my plans time and again, I'll make sure your death isn't a painless one."

Without warning he leapt forward, his leg lashing out in a kick aimed for Cui Buqu's chest. He'd held nothing back; if that kick connected, Cui Buqu's ribs would shatter, their fragments puncturing his lungs in an instant.

Yuan Sansi was closest. He had only to reach out and he could stop the kick, yet he had no intention of doing so. But there was still Fan Yun. Though he was beneath Yuxiu as the third-rank San-xiansheng, Yuxiu was wary of him, a clear sign that, of the two, the pavilion leader valued Fan Yun more. Yet Fan Yun said nothing either. He watched coolly from the side, as if resolved to see Cui Buqu suffer.

It was impossible for Cui Buqu to avoid the kick. He closed his eyes and waited for agony to lance through him.

Yet someone else was faster than any of them had imagined: He swept in front of Yuxiu and deftly deflected the attack. The two exchanged several swift blows before springing apart.

Yuxiu's face was a mask of fury. "Feng Xiao, you said you would join us. So it was a lie!"

Fan Yun and Yuan Sansi both glared fiercely at Feng Xiao. No matter how excellent a martial artist Feng Xiao was, three opponents of this caliber were too much for him. He sneered and looked at Yuxiu like he was a fool. "I've found Cui Buqu distasteful for a long time. If you get first shot at him, will there be anything left for me? Look at the state of him."

Yuxiu narrowed his eyes. "And you plan to leave him alive for me? What are you going to do? Give him a few dainty slaps across the face like a woman?"

Feng Xiao laughed derisively and extended a hand toward Fan Yun. "Fan-xiansheng, perhaps you'd be kind enough to lend me your dagger."

Fan Yun untied the dagger at his waist and handed it over. He watched Feng Xiao carefully, as if testing whether Feng Xiao really had sworn himself to their cause.

Feng Xiao looked down at the dagger in his hand. It was a rare and precious weapon, razor sharp and glinting with cold light. If a blade this sharp was drawn lightly over one’s skin, blood would instantly well up in its wake.

He gripped the dagger and walked step by step toward Cui Buqu, who remained sitting, perfectly calm. They were a mere arm’s length from each other, yet separated by a yawning chasm, a distance as vast as mountains and oceans between them.

# Chapter 116

*HIS ACTING IS TOO PERFECT; he's overdoing it,* Cui Buqu thought.

If time could reverse, and he could return to the moments before they entered Mount Tiannan, he'd have told Feng Xiao that going too far was just as bad as stopping short. Moderation was the key. Maybe Yuxiu and Yuan Sansi couldn't tell, but he oughtn't underestimate Fan Yun.

But this was a fantasy. Even he'd never expected Feng Xiao would do such a thing—that he'd sell him out to the Thirteen Floors without a word to gain their trust. Yet this was indeed Feng Xiao's style: willful and reckless, walking the treacherous path, fighting without leaving an out for himself. If Cui Buqu hadn't been the poor sucker who'd been set up, he would have praised Feng Xiao's plan.

But right now, he was in a terrible predicament.

If Feng Xiao showed him mercy, he'd be unable to win the trust of Yuxiu and the others. If Feng Xiao showed none, all he'd sacrifice was a man who was neither an enemy nor a friend. So why wouldn't he be ruthless?

Either do it right, or don't do it at all.

Cui Buqu watched as Feng Xiao approached a step at a time. He dropped to one knee, coming eye to eye with Cui Buqu. Feng Xiao's handsome face remained devoid of expression. A faint light flickered in the depths of his eyes, cold and remote. There was no reflection of Cui Buqu within them.

He was on the knife's edge between life and death, but Cui Buqu's mind was wandering. If it were him, he thought, what would he do? One couldn't capture a tiger cub without venturing into the tiger's den. If Cui Buqu had been in the same position, perhaps he'd have made the very same choice as Feng Xiao.

Cui Buqu silently chuckled to himself. The fact that he was thinking about this at all was proof his heart was in turmoil. Cui Buqu had always

been cold and decisive, a man who didn't hesitate to weave even himself in his own plots—never before had he wondered anything of the sort.

"Have you ever thought how you will die?" he heard Feng Xiao ask.

Cui Buqu tilted his head a little as he gave it serious thought. "I used to think I'd die in the Cui manor, but I didn't. After I left, there were a few treacherous incidents where I thought I was done for, but I didn't die then either. Later, in the Khaganate, I thought I'd die in that yurt with Yuxiu. But in the end, you came in time."

Feng Xiao's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Then you've been quite fortunate."

Cui Buqu nodded. "I think so too—"

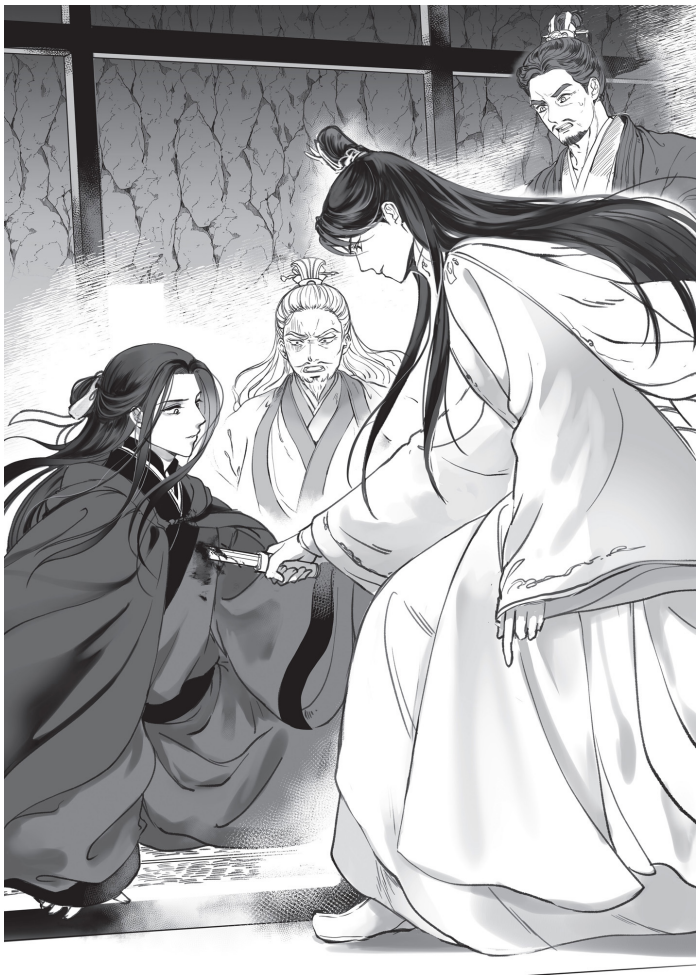
Feng Xiao's hand flashed forward.

Coldness slid into Cui Buqu's chest, and sharp agony exploded through him. He looked down at the dagger, buried to the hilt in his flesh. Blood spilled from the wound, soaking his robes in crimson.

Pain. Excruciating pain.

He furrowed his brow, trying to recall the last time he'd felt pain like this.

There was the year he'd left the Cui family. At that time, both his lungs and heart had troubled him greatly, and he had been caught in a heavy downpour on the road. He'd curled up beneath the eaves, but the wind whipped the rain in, battering his face and drenching his clothes. He'd burned with fever, his head hazy and muddled. He thought he'd die that night.



Then there was the time, not long ago at all, when he'd used incense of helplessness against Yuxiu in the Western Khaganate, poisoning himself along with his enemy and aggravating his existing illness. Yuxiu had wrapped his fingers around Cui Buqu's neck; his vision had sparked with stars and every breath had been excruciating.

But it hadn't been as painful as it was now. Could the dagger be poisoned?

He instinctively tried to draw breath, but it only aggravated his wound. His entire body trembled with pain, and his face was paler than the gauzy, snow-white robes of those two beautiful maids. Bloody foam bubbled at the corner of his mouth as he panted raggedly. But he didn't moan.

Feng Xiao had thought he'd be treated to sneering mockery and vicious curses from Cui Buqu. But there was nothing.

He saw Cui Buqu's thin lips, stained with blood, tremble as they moved in a near-soundless sentence: *You saved my life last time. I've repaid you now*.

A slight, involuntary tremor went through Feng Xiao's hand. He was still holding the dagger's hilt; that quiver instantly worsened the pain Cui Buqu was in. Blood, thick and red, slid from the corner of his mouth to drip from the tip of his chin. It fell drop by drop onto his lapels, dyeing the fabric with bright splashes of red.

The whole thing had happened in a flash; for a moment, everyone stood dumbfounded. Shock and disbelief were scrawled over Yuan Sansi's face. Even Yuxiu thought Feng Xiao had gone mad. Cui Buqu had refused to join, but now wasn't the time to kill him. Yuxiu had only wanted to torture him a bit to vent his anger, but Feng Xiao had taken it a step further, going straight for the kill.

"Stop!" Fan Yun cried, reaching out to shove Feng Xiao away. Feng Xiao didn't dodge; he allowed Fan Yun to push him back a few steps.

Fan Yun stepped forward to examine Cui Buqu's wound. In seconds, he'd sealed several major acupoints and called for someone to bring gauze and medicine. Feng Xiao had shown no mercy. All of them could see that

the blade was fully buried inside Cui Buqu's body. Even Yuxiu couldn't claim Feng Xiao was putting on an act.

"You're too rash, Feng-gongzi!" Fan Yun snapped. "Even if he refuses to join us now, he's still of more use to us alive."

Very carefully, he drew the dagger from Cui Buqu's chest. A fresh spurt of blood followed the tip as it was extracted. Cui Buqu slumped against one of the cave's rocks, limp and unmoving. He was barely conscious.

"Like I said," Feng Xiao replied coldly, "it's either me or him. We have the Jiejian Bureau already. I don't see how keeping the Zuoyue Bureau chief alive is useful. Unless it's so he can rat me out to the court?"

Fan Yun was furious. "If he dies, a great number of our plans will be ruined!"

Feng Xiao smiled thinly. "To think Fan-xiansheng would still value him so much. As expected of the disciple who was your pride and joy. In the end, you can't put aside your fondness for him. But you were the one who lured him here—to get so upset over it now, don't you think it's hypocritical?"

"No one in the Zuoyue Bureau knows he's here," Fan Yun said severely. "We could have used him as bait for his subordinates, then captured them all in one fell swoop. Our leader admires Cui Buqu and sees him as a kindred spirit. Not long ago, he sent a message informing us that he wishes to meet him in person. If he dies on our watch, how will I explain?"

Feng Xiao dusted off his clothes and said nonchalantly, "Those are Fan-xiansheng's problems, not mine."

He turned to leave without sparing a glance for anyone else.

Yuan Sansi watched him melt into the darkness. "That man has a heart of stone, to deal a fatal blow to his former comrade without batting an eye," he whispered. "If we welcome him, I fear we'll be cultivating a threat to ourselves."

Yuxiu snorted a laugh. "If anything, he did me a service. If Fan-xiansheng hadn't forbidden it, I'd have killed Cui Buqu before he got to

him!”

Fan Yun checked Cui Buqu’s pulse. After a moment, he sighed. “I’ll take him back first. His wound is severe; I doubt he’ll wake anytime soon. There’s no way he can meet our leader like this. I’ll have to send him word and wait for his decision. If there’s anything else, we can discuss it later.”

So saying, he scooped Cui Buqu up in his arms and hurried away.

Feng Xiao’s stab had been ruthless. Cui Buqu had lost too much blood—his pulse was terribly faint. His life hung by a thread; to save him, Fan Yun poured all his strength into protecting Cui Buqu’s already fragile heart, preserving his life and channeling yang energy into him. For four hours he pulled Cui Buqu back from the edge of death, a feat more exhausting than dueling a master martial artist, before some heat finally returned to Cui Buqu’s chest. For the moment, he was out of danger.

Fan Yun’s face was white with fatigue, and his legs were weak and wobbly. He entrusted Cui Buqu’s care to his maid and returned to his room to meditate and recover his strength.

The woman left to serve Cui Buqu was one of the maids who’d brought the wine saucers earlier. She soaked a cloth and wrung out the water, using it to dab away the blood on Cui Buqu’s face.

Cui Buqu’s injuries were severe, and Fan Yun had given strict orders that he wasn’t to be moved or turned. The maid carefully peeled away his outer robes, leaving him clothed in a single inner garment. He was a gruesome sight, over half his body crusted with dried blood. The maid moved him as gently as possible, afraid to startle him and cause him more pain. But Cui Buqu was insensible to everything. From beginning to end, his eyes remained shut, as silent as a corpse.

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The cave they were in had once contained treasures from a bygone dynasty. After the trove’s discovery, Yuan Sansi had transformed it into a base for the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, one of several such strongholds in the north. It was spacious yet concealed, guarded by traps and hidden

passages, and all the chambers were conveniently interlinked. Its interior comforts were in no way inferior to the manor of any noble clan—in fact, its chambers might have been even more lavishly appointed.

Feng Xiao, however, was a man who spent his days drowning in luxury and was moreover fussy to the extreme. He showed no reaction even when presented with the most opulent of furnishings, using them as casually as one might common wares.

The chamber where he had stabbed Cui Buqu reeked of blood; he left it without a backward glance and returned to his room. A familiar sensual fragrance hit him as he entered, overpowering the metallic stench that lingered in his nose. A half-naked beauty reclined upon his bed, her sweet scent adding a touch of charm to the erotic picture before him.

A thin blanket was artfully draped over the beauty's chest to reveal the rounded top of her ample breasts, and a pair of long legs peeked from beneath the covers, smooth and pale as creamy jade. Her eyes fluttered open, shimmering like starlight beneath the glow of night pearls; when she smiled at Feng Xiao, even the stars adorning the night sky outside seemed to lose their luster.

"You're back," she said languidly. Only two words, but they were drippingly tender, seeping into the listener's bones. Feng Xiao felt as if a delicate claw was tickling his ear. Anyone who could remain unaffected by such a tableau wasn't fit to be called a man.

"Why are you in my bed?" Feng Xiao didn't move from the doorway. His eyes were tranquil as he looked her up and down as if she were a statue of stone.

Feng Xiaolian nearly laughed in rage. "I'm beginning to suspect that none of the men within the Thirteen Floors have anything between their legs! You're the fourth one who's looked at this body of mine without any reaction!"

Feng Xiao raised one brow. "Who are the other three? Please introduce me to these upstanding gentlemen."

Feng Xiaolian sniffed coquettishly and slid to the edge of the bed, wrapping the blanket around her as a makeshift robe. She sat up and began to count off on her fingers. "The pavilion leader, Fan-xiansheng, Yuxiu, and

now you. Fan-xiansheng has incredible willpower, so he hardly counts. Yuxiu's heart belongs to another; in his eyes I'm scarcely better than a corpse. Anyway, I'd rather not provoke him. But you—why are you so unaffected? It makes no sense."

She rose from the bed, the dark blanket forming a train behind her as she padded over to Feng Xiao and circled around him. Without warning, she reached out to embrace him from behind, only to find her arms full of empty air. She trod on the blanket and tripped, falling to the floor.

"Feng—*Xiao*!" She sounded as if she might pass away from rage.

"What about Yuan Sansi? Is he also immune to your charms?" Feng Xiao smiled and bent down, scooping her up and tossing her carelessly onto the bed.

Feng Xiaolian slanted him a look, her demeanor a seamless blend of sensuality and innocence. "Do you think I accept just anyone? I have no interest in someone like Yuan Sansi!"

"What a rare creature you are!" Feng Xiao climbed atop her, unhurried, and lowered his mouth to her ear. "You've met the pavilion leader before?"

Feng Xiaolian thought herself the most peerless of beauties, a woman who'd seen it all. But when she felt the heat of Feng Xiao's breath on her neck, she found her composure slipping. "Of course I have. Ah, mm, be gentle…" Her voice rose in pitch, turning into a drawn-out gasp.

"*Whore*." A man's voice from beyond the door. In the next moment, they heard the speaker turn on his heel and leave.

On the bed, Feng Xiaolian blinked. "Why did you grab my waist?"

"Why did you play along?" countered Feng Xiao.

Feng Xiaolian smiled. "Isn't it an honor to enjoy a romantic evening with the deputy leader? I'd bet good money our eavesdropper just now was Yuan Sansi."

"Is he so jealous of me?"

Feng Xiaolian giggled. "No, he doesn't trust you."

“You knew it was him from his footsteps. You’re quite skilled. You shouldn’t have ranked below Duan Qihu and Yuheng.”

Feng Xiaolian stretched languidly. “I did obtain the title of the thirteenth director, Shisan-xiansheng, but it was only thanks to my reputation and my knowledge of some secret pair cultivation techniques. How could grandmasters and experts like you hold me as your equal? Feng-lang, you’re flirting with me now, but your heart isn’t in it. Could it be…”

The hand behind Feng Xiao’s back slowly clenched into a fist.

“…Could it be that you’re like Yuxiu? You already have a beloved?” she finished.

Feng Xiao neither confirmed nor denied it. “What do you think?”

Feng Xiaolian twined her arms around his neck. “I think most people are too far beneath you to catch your eye. The only person you love is yourself.”

Feng Xiao smiled. “You know, I’m starting to like you. What kind of man is the pavilion leader?”

“Why are you so interested in the pavilion leader?” Feng Xiaolian asked curiously.

“He’s built such a formidable organization and gathered so many powerful masters and factions beneath him. Who wouldn’t be curious? I’m the newly appointed deputy leader, yet I’ve never laid eyes on the man. Surely that’s rather odd?”

“Worry not,” Feng Xiaolian said with a smile. “It’s the Qixi Festival tomorrow, the seventh day of the seventh month. I heard the leader will be here as well. Our Thirteen Floors will be a full house then; all of us will be present.”

Something flickered in Feng Xiao’s eyes. “Will Lin Yong and Ning Shewo also be here?”

“Of course,” said Feng Xiaolian. “You don’t think they really went to Donghai Commandery? This is the real meeting location.”

“But of the Thirteen Floors, I still don’t know the identities of the ninth and tenth directors—Jiu-xiansheng and Shi-xiansheng. Who are they?”

Feng Xiaolian tittered. “If you act so impatient, I’ll start getting suspicious. Perhaps you only pretended to join so you could probe for information.”

Feng Xiao smiled back. “If I say I’m here for you, would you believe me?”

Feng Xiaolian blinked as Feng Xiao lowered his head as if to kiss her. She had just parted her lips to speak when her expression shifted; she took to the air like a swallow, sweeping out from beneath Feng Xiao. The dark blanket covering her was torn to shreds in the air, yet she ignored it and sprang toward the exit.

*“Help—!”*

But Feng Xiao was faster. Before she could put any force behind her cry, a bloody gash rent her throat.

Feng Xiaolian opened her lovely eyes wide and stared at Feng Xiao. Never had she imagined she’d meet such a comical, unceremonious end.

“How clever of you. I only wanted to knock you out, but you saw through me,” Feng Xiao said regretfully. When he drew back his hand, there was a bloodstained zither string in it.

Had Cui Yong known Feng Xiao would pluck out the strings of his beloved Yuyin to use as a murder weapon, Cui Buqu wouldn’t have needed to do anything at all. He’d have died right there, apoplectic with rage.

“This is going to be rather troublesome,” Feng Xiao murmured to himself, still holding one of the beauty’s supple arms.

***

Cui Buqu wandered within the darkness, his body sinking endlessly down.

He felt someone take hold of his hand, slowly pulling him out of the abyss, inch by inch. His savior had immense strength; Cui Buqu was unable to resist him. He was dragged up to solid ground, but his suffering

continued. An intense agony wracked his body, and memories poured in like the rising tide.

He wanted to cough, but the pain prevented him. His mind was disoriented and confused—for a moment, he was certain he was still nine years old, thrust back into his darkest hour with no end in sight.

He couldn’t die. He absolutely couldn’t die.

He had to live.

He *must* live.

His lips were pried open, and a coolness trickled in. The searing pain in his throat was alleviated, but the agony in his chest burned only more fiercely. Someone seemed to be whispering in his ear. They gripped his feeble fingers, their touch light as a feather, as tender as if he was a treasure they were afraid to break.

For as long as he could remember, Cui Buqu had experienced all sorts of ups and downs as he traveled the treacherous road that was his life. He was fated to lose those dear to him; he was a cold and callous man. It was impossible that he could receive such gentleness.

*So it’s a dream after all.*

He breathed a silent sigh before letting the darkness claim him once more.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

*Peerless*

VOLUME 4

APPENDIX

# Character & Name Guide

# Appendix: Character & Name Guide

## HISTORICAL PERIOD

*Peerless* is set in the first era of the Sui dynasty, Kaihuang. Emperor Wen of Sui (given name Yang Jian) established his dynasty in 581 AD after usurping the throne from the previous Zhou dynasty. Though Sui was a short-lived dynasty that eventually fell apart in the hands of his son, Emperor Yang, Emperor Wen is viewed as one of the most influential emperors of ancient China, both for his prosperous rule and for the reunification of the Central Plains after over two hundred years of war and turmoil.

## CHARACTERS

**FENG XIAO 凤霄 ("HIGH HEAVENS"):** Deputy Chief of the Jiejian Bureau. Courtesy name Yuntian.

**CUI BUQU 崔不去 ("I WON'T GO"):** Chief of the Zuoyue Bureau.

## JIEJIAN BUREAU

**PEI JINGZHE 裴惊蛰:** Feng Xiao's beleaguered assistant at the Jiejian Bureau.

**MING YUE 明月:** Third chief of the Jiejian Bureau.

## ZUOYUE BUREAU

**QIAO XIAN 乔仙:** Member of the Zuoyue Bureau.

**ZHANGSUN BODHI 长孙菩提:** Deputy Chief of the Zuoyue Bureau.

## HEHUAN SECT

**BING XIAN 冰弦:** A favored disciple of Hehuan Sect.

## SUI IMPERIAL COURT

**YANG JIAN 杨坚:** Emperor Wen of Sui, the first emperor of the Sui dynasty.

**DUGU QIELUO 独孤伽罗:** Empress Wenxian.

**YANG YONG 杨勇:** The crown prince and eldest son of Yang Jian and Empress Dugu.

**YANG GUANG 杨广:** The Prince of Jin and second son of Yang Jian and Empress Dugu.

**YANG LIHUA 杨丽华:** Princess Leping, Yang Jian and Empress Dugu's eldest daughter and the former empress of the previous Zhou dynasty.

**YUWEN EYING 宇文娥英:** The daughter of Yang Lihua and the emperor of the previous dynasty, Yuwen Yun.

**YUXIU 玉秀:** A trusted consultant of Yang Guang, the Prince of Jin.

## GÖKTÜRK KHAGANATE

**FO'ER 佛耳:** The foremost martial artist of the Göktürk Khaganate, who pledges loyalty to Ishbara Khagan of the Eastern Göktürk Khaganate.

**JINLIAN 金莲:** Apa Khagan's lesser khatun, who arrived in Sui as an envoy, hoping for an alliance.

**APA KHAGAN 阿波可汗:** The ruler of the Western Göktürk Khaganate.

**PRINCE ADE 阿德:** The second prince of the Western Göktürk Khaganate, and the younger son of Apa Khagan.

**PRINCE YIXUN 伊旬:** The first prince of the Western Göktürk Khaganate, and the eldest son of Apa Khagan and the greater khatun.

## BOLING-ANPING

**SUN JIMIN 孙济民:** An elderly doctor who works at one of the Cui family's pharmacies.

**CUI YONG 崔咏:** The elderly, reigning patriarch of the Cui clan.

**CUI XU 崔珝:** Cui-dalang, Cui Yong's eldest son.

**CUI HUI 崔珲:** Cui-erlang, Cui Yong's second son, who married Yu Mo. Deceased.

**CUI LIN 崔琳:** Cui-sanlang, Cui Yong's third son.

**CUI PEI 崔佩:** Cui-silang, Cui Yong's illegitimate youngest son.

**CUI-JIUNIANG 崔九娘:** Cui Lin's daughter.

**LADY LU 卢氏:** Cui Lin's wife and Cui-jiuniang's mother.

**YU MO 馀茉:** Cui Hui's widow. Deceased.

**YUAN SANSI 元三思:** Formerly known as Yuan Sheng, the newly appointed commandery governor of Boling.

## NAMES, HONORIFICS, & TITLES

### Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

**A-:** Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

**DA-:** A character meaning "eldest." Can be used as a prefix.

**-ER:** Usually a character meaning "child." When added to a name as a suffix, it expresses affection. However, Feng Xiao's nickname, "Feng-er," uses a different character that means "second." Thus, in *Peerless*, "Feng-er" is an abbreviated way of saying "Deputy Bureau Chief Feng Xiao."

**LAO-:** A friendly prefix meaning "old."

**XIAO-:** A character meaning "small" or "youngest." When added to a name as a prefix, it expresses affection.

### Courtesy Addresses

**GONGZI:** A respectful address for young men, originally only for those from affluent households. Though appropriate in all formal occasions, it's often preferred when the addressee outranks the speaker.

**LANG:** A general term for "man." Can be used to politely address a man by pairing it with other characters that denote his place within a certain

household. For example, “dalang,” “erlang,” and “sanlang” mean “eldest son,” “second son,” and “third son” respectively. “Langjun” is a polite address for any man, similar to “gentleman.”

**NIANG:** A general term for “woman,” which can be appended as a suffix. Follows the same pairing rules as “lang.” “Niangzi” is a variant that can be used alone to address any woman, similar to “lady.”

**SHIDI:** Younger martial brother, used to refer to younger disciples of the same generation.

**XIANDI:** A respectful address for a younger man.

**XIANSHENG:** A polite address for men, originally only for those of great learning or those who had made significant contributions to society. Sometimes seen as an equivalent to “Mr.” in English.

**XIONG:** A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

### Martial Arts and Tutelage

**SHIXIONG:** Older martial brother.

**SHIDI:** Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one’s own sect, or junior male disciples of one’s own master.

**SHIMEI:** Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one’s own sect, or junior female disciples of one’s own master.

**SHIMU:** The wife of one’s master.

**SHIBO:** Martial uncle. For the shixiong of one’s master.

### Other

**XIANZHI:** Virtuous nephew. A respectful address for the son of one’s friends.

**-CHANSHI:** A suffix meaning monk.

APPENDIX

# Glossary

# GLOSSARY

**CONCUBINES:** In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to take women as concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status, hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have tens or even a hundred.

**DIVINATION:** Fortune-telling was an art of the highly learned in ancient China, with many separate branches, all rooted in Daoism. One example was physiognomy, where one reads a person's fate and state of health through their facial features, complexion, body, and bones. Another was geomancy, often known as feng shui, where the diviner could read the "auspiciousness" associated with a location or placement via the qi flowing through the area. Another is Ziping divination, where the fortune teller calculates one's fate through their birth date.

**KING YAMA:** King of Hell or the supreme judge of the underworld. His role in the underworld is to pass judgment on the dead, sending souls on to their next life depending on the karma they accrued from their last one.

**PAIR CULTIVATION:** Also translated as dual cultivation, shuangxiu (双修 / "cultivate as a pair") is a practice that uses sex between participants to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

**PAPER MONEY:** Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

**QIXI FESTIVAL:** Also known as Chinese Valentine's Day. Taking place on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, it celebrates the yearly

reunion of the Cowherd (Altair) and the Weaver Girl (Vega).

**TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE:** Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing—or in wuxia, to render someone unconscious.

Another central concept in traditional Chinese medicine is that disease arises from an imbalance of elements in the body caused by disharmony in internal functions. For example, an excess of internal heat can cause symptoms such as fever, thirst, insomnia, and redness of the face. Excess internal heat can be treated with the consumption of foods with cooling properties, such as lotus tea.

**YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY:** Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite and contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and difference. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish whichever energy they lack.

**XIANGQI:** Also known as elephant chess, or Chinese chess. Like Western chess, it’s a two-player game, where each player starts holding a set number of pieces that are used to capture the opponent’s pieces. The game ends when one side’s “general” piece can no longer escape, the equivalent to “checkmate” in chess.

# Footnotes

### Chapter 80

[1] A suffix meaning monk.

### Chapter 88

[2] A poem from the Tang dynasty, “Overlooking the City from Guanyin Terrace,” by Bai Juyi.

[3] From A New Account of the Tales of the World, a collection of historical anecdotes compiled by Liu Yiqing of the Liu Song dynasty.

### Chapter 91

[4] 卌. Can be seen as an amalgamation of two “two” characters (二). The character can be seen as being propped up by four points of support, and thus four legs. The four legs have two protrusions each, hence eight heads. Five eights are forty, or four tens, and you can split the character into four ten characters (十).

### Chapter 95

[5] A friendly prefix meaning “old.”

### Chapter 96

[6] The Daodejing, attributed to Laozi, is one of the two foundational texts of Daoism. The Thirty-Six Stratagems is a famous essay on military strategies and one of the seven military classics.

### Chapter 103

[7] Wang Xizhi’s Lantingji Xu (“Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion”), or Lanting Xu (“Orchid Pavilion Preface”), is a piece of Chinese calligraphy work generally considered to be written by the well-known calligrapher Wang Xizhi (303–361) from the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420).

**Chapter 104**

[8] The three Caos refer to the famous trio of Cao Cao, Cao Pi, and Cao Zhi of the Three Kingdoms era, who were talented poets on top of being statesmen and warlords. Xie Lingyun, also known as the Duke of Kangle, was one of the greatest poets during the Southern and Northern Dynasties era.

**Chapter 107**

[9] Younger martial sister. For junior female disciples of one’s own master or sect.

[10] The wife of one’s master.

**Chapter 112**

[11] Virtuous nephew. A respectful address for the son of one’s friends.

[12] Martial uncle. For the shixiong of one’s master.

**Chapter 113**

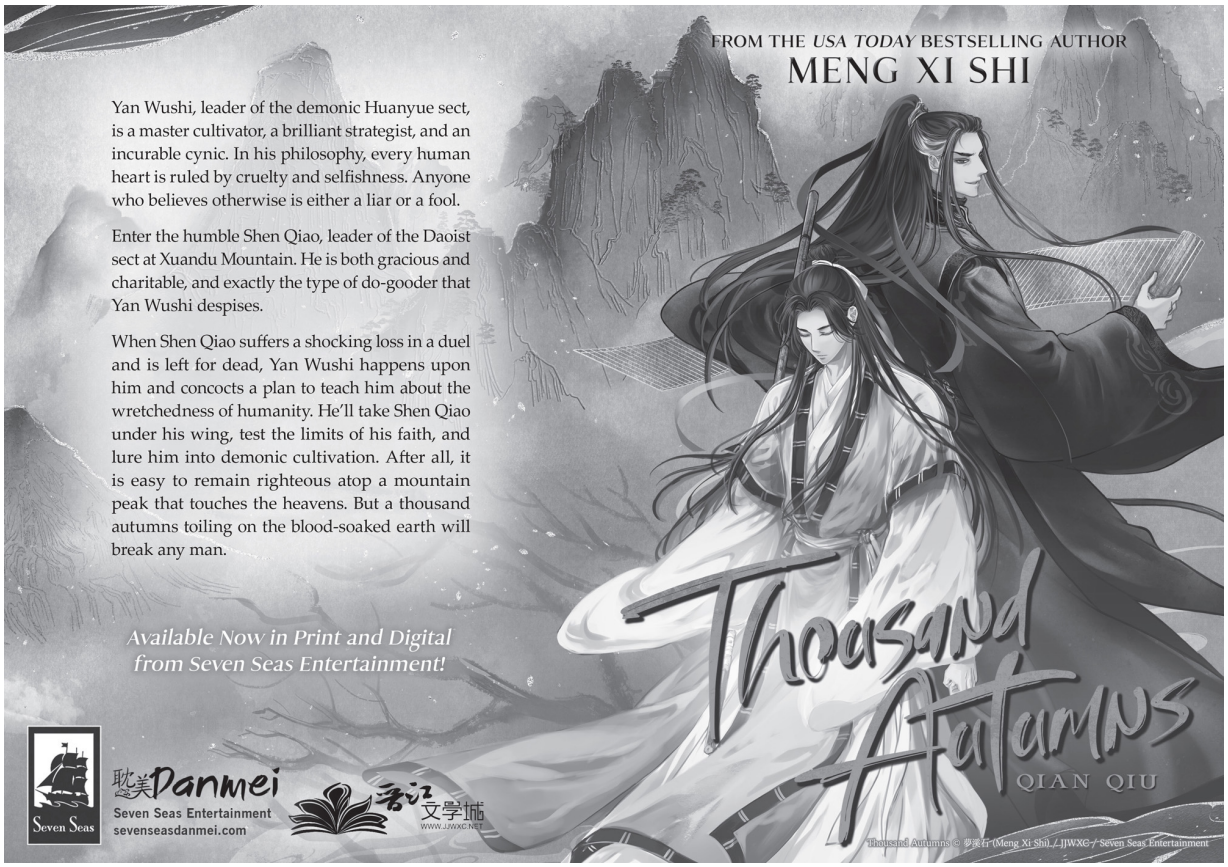
[13] 巽, or ☴, a trigram representing wind. In the Later Heaven bagua, used for living beings, xun was in the southeast.

[14] A great military strategist and politician from the early Western Han dynasty, seen as one of their three great heroes.

## About the Author

## Meng Xi Shi

Meng Xi Shi is a renowned web author whose works of fiction combine detailed research with witty writing, winning the hearts of readers around the world. Her works are published in China by Jingjiang Literature City. She goes by “Meng Xi Shi Ya” on Weibo.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A Race Against Time
After the long journey to the Western Khaganate, Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao find their diplomatic efforts stymied when they are accused of murdering a Göktürk prince. Thinking on his feet, Cui Buqu requests a single day to crack the case and clear their names. Yet to everyone's surprise, the crafty chief of the Zuoyue Bureau offers himself as hostage, leaving the investigation—and his life—in Feng Xiao's peerlessly beautiful hands.
Now Feng Xiao faces a difficult choice: watch his rival perish in the desert or risk his own life in pursuit of the true killer. Time is running out, and unsettling forces are at work within the Western Khaganate. Yet Feng Xiao can't shake the feeling that Cui Buqu may have one final card to play—one that could reveal the truth before it's too late.
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